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SCRIPTURES

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Job - Song of Songs

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Contents

[9]	Job	3
	1. Translating Ancient Hebrew Poetry.....	3
	^[11] 2. The Heavenly Background of Job's Suffering.....	3
	3. First Round of Speeches.....	5
	^[18] 4. Second Round of Speeches.....	7
	5. Third Round of Speeches.....	8
	6. Elihu against Job and His Three Friends.....	9
	7. Yahweh's Answer and Job's Restoration.....	11
	^[31] 8. A Proclamation about the Justification of the Church.....	13
[34]	Psalms	15
	1. Superscriptions and Basic Divisions.....	15
	2. Praising the Lord Responsively.....	15
	3. Structures Used in the Psalms.....	17
	4. Complacency in the Psalms?.....	19
	5. Enmity in the Psalms.....	20
	6. Psalms of Imprecation.....	22
	7. Petition and Thanksgiving.....	24
	8. Songs of Praise to Yahweh.....	25
	^[60] 9. Jerusalem Psalms.....	26
	^[62] 10. The Psalms and the Messiah.....	27
	11. The Meaning of Deliverance in the Psalms.....	28
[67]	Proverbs	30
	1. Wisdom from Above.....	30
	2. The Beginning of Wisdom—for the Righteous.....	31
	3. Daily Life and the Ten Words of the Covenant.....	32
	4. The Fifth Commandment.....	33
	5. The Sixth Commandment.....	34
	6. The Seventh Commandment.....	34
	7. The Ninth Commandment.....	35
	8. Numerical Proverbs.....	36
	9. Equipped for Every Good Work.....	37
[86]	Ecclesiastes	39
	1. Background and Authorship.....	39
	2. Is Life Meaningless?.....	40
	3. Back to Genesis 1-4.....	40
	4. The Perspective of Faith.....	41
	5. Obedience and Government.....	42
	6. All Things Made New.....	43
[100]	Song of Songs	45
	1. Sex and Grace.....	45
	2. A Celebration of Love.....	46
	3. More Than Solomon.....	47
	4. The Unity of the Book.....	48
[112]	Index	50

[9] Job

1. Translating Ancient Hebrew Poetry

Dramatic advances. It is easier to understand the book of Job in the translation presented in the Revised Standard Version than in the King James Bible's translation. Biblical scholarship has made dramatic advances since 1611, and recent Bible translators have made good use of its results. Although the translators of the King James Bible are not to be blamed, they did present an almost incomprehensible reading of certain texts, as we see from the following comparisons.

KJV	RSV
For vain man would be wise, though man be born like a wild ass's colt (11:12).	But a stupid man will get understanding, when a wild ass's colt is born a man.
He setteth an end to darkness, and searcheth out all perfection: the stones of darkness, and the shadow of death (28:3).	Men put an end to darkness, and search out to the farthest bound the ore in gloom and deep darkness.
[10] The flood breaketh out from the inhabitant; even the waters forgotten of the foot: they are dried up, they are gone away from men (28:4).	They open shafts in a valley away from where men live; they are forgotten by travelers, they hang afar from men, they swing to and fro.

I'm sure you will agree that there is quite a difference between the two versions. Moreover, a good part of the book of Job was written as *poetry*. Fortunately, the Revised Standard Version prints the poetry in verse form. (The King James Bible does not.)

Repetition of ideas. Hebrew does not use the rhyme schemes that we often use in poetry, namely, making certain lines end in the same sound. The poetic works of the Hebrews are recognizable as poetry mainly in that an idea expressed in a certain line is repeated and clarified in the next. Consider the following example from the book of Job:

That path no bird of prey knows,
and the falcon's eye has not seen it.
The proud beasts have not trodden it;
the lion has not passed over it.
Man puts his hand to the flinty rock,
and overturns mountains by the roots.
He cuts out channels in the rocks,
and his eye sees every precious thing (28:7-10).

As far as content goes, the first line agrees with the second in each case. We could say that in Hebrew poetry, *thoughts* are rhymed rather than words. (This point will be pursued further in connection with the book of Psalms.)

[11] 2. The Heavenly Background of Job's Suffering

A devilish experiment. Both the beginning and end of the book of Job are written in prose form. The first two chapters not only tell us about the catastrophes that struck Job on earth, they also show us something of the heavenly background. They immediately confront us with the "problem" dealt with in the book.

Job, who lived in the land of Uz, was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (1:1). As far as family and possessions were concerned, he had been richly blessed.

In 1:6 we are given a glimpse of what goes on in heaven. The Lord is having a conversation with satan. The devil suggests to God that Job serves Him so faithfully

because God has made it worth his while. "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face" (vs. 9-10, 11 NIV).

What happened next? The Lord gave Job's possessions into satan's hands; that is to say, the devil received permission to conduct an experiment to find out whether Job would turn his back on God if everything was taken away from him. Calamity after calamity struck the poor man in the land of Uz. Soon Job was mourning the loss of his possessions and children. But at the same time he sang: "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (1:21).

Covered with sores from head to foot. In all of this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong (1:22). The outcome of the testing was a great disappointment for satan, but he was not about to give up: "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But put forth thy hand now, ^[12] and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face" (2:4-5).

Then we are shown Job as we often imagine him: a man covered with sores from head to foot, sitting on a heap of ashes as he scratches himself with a piece of a broken pot. To make matters worse, his wife asks: "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God, and die" (2:9). The woman speaks here as she once spoke in Paradise: she voices the serpent's message.

Job rejects her foolish words. He accepts both good and evil from the hand of God. Satan's attempt fails again, for in all this suffering Job has not sinned in his mind.

Three visitors. This is not the end of the book of Job; in fact, it's only the beginning. Three friends come to visit him—wise men from the east. Their purpose is to lament with Job and offer words of comfort. For seven days and nights they sit in painful silence with Job on his heap of ashes.

Finally Job speaks up. He curses the day he was born. Suffering has not passed him by; his life is shot through with pain. He doesn't see the meaning of his existence anymore. The suffering man seated on the heap of ashes takes up the same theme we find in Ecclesiastes, another book of wisdom, namely, the vanity or idleness or uselessness of human existence: "Why should the sufferer be born to see the light? Why is life given to men who find it so bitter?" (3:20 NEB).

Jeremiah and Job. The Bible also tells us about another man who cursed the day of his birth—Jeremiah. This prophet used language just as strong as Job's. Imprisoned in one of the gates of the temple, the meaning of his life and his work as prophet seemed to escape him. No one was listening (Jer. 20:14-18; see also vs. 7ff).

Now, I'm sure no one would argue that Jeremiah was a ^[13] mere tool in satan's hand at that moment. Jeremiah was a human being, a man of the ancient Near East, and therefore he was inclined to get carried away when he talked.

The same tendency was present in Job's case. He did not turn his back on God—not for a moment. But he simply could not understand why he had to suffer *so much*, why he had to be *crushed* in the tempest, why his wounds were multiplied "without cause" (9:17; see also 2:3 on the "cause" of Job's misery).

An outline of the contents. The rest of the book of Job focuses on this issue. After Job's lament, his three friends speak—Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. Each time one of them speaks, Job answers. There are three rounds of speeches. At the end it appears that the friends of Job have nothing more to say. The last time Bildad speaks, it is only briefly, and from Zophar we hear nothing at all the last time around.

When they are all finished, we hear a final speech from Job, in which he swears an oath that he is not guilty. Then Elihu, a fourth friend, steps forward and makes a speech that seems to prepare the way for the Lord's answer out of a whirlwind. When the Lord

Himself finally speaks, Job is humbled. The final chapter of the book, which is written in prose form, tells us how the Lord restored Job to his original glory.

On the basis of this survey, we can outline the contents of the book of Job as follows:

- Introduction (ch. 1-2)
- Job's affliction (ch. 3)
- First round of speeches (ch. 4-14)
 - Eliphaz speaks (ch. 4-5)
 - Job answers (ch. 6-7)
 - Bildad speaks (ch. 8)
 - [14] Job answers (ch. 9-10)
 - Zopharspeaks(ch. 11)
 - Job answers (ch. 12-14)
- Second round of speeches (ch. 15-21)
 - Eliphaz speaks (ch. 15)
 - Job answers (ch. 16-17)
 - Bildad speaks (ch. 18)
 - Job answers (ch. 19)
 - Zophar speaks (ch. 20)
 - Job answers (ch. 21)
- Third round of speeches (ch. 22-26)
 - Eliphaz speaks (ch. 22)
 - Job answers (ch. 23-24)
 - Bildad speaks (ch. 25)
 - Job answers (ch. 26)
- Job's final speech (ch. 27-31)
- Elihu speaks (ch. 32-37)
- The words of the Lord (ch. 38-41)
- The subsequent blessing of Job (ch. 42)

3. First Round of Speeches

Cyclical reasoning. As you read the speeches in the book of Job, bear in mind that Job and his friends are not inhabitants of the Western world, that is, people who know how to spell out their thoughts in a logical order. The speeches we read in the book of Job are the words of *Eastern* wise men, of people who elaborate on a theme in a peculiar poetic manner. If the cyclical way of reasoning engaged in by the three men seems strange and alien, it will seem less so if you remember that they lived in a much more settled milieu than we do, a world in which the pace of life was much slower.

The speech of such wise men is characterized by a great deal of repetition and also by the use of images. Although [15] the conversation deals with an explosive topic, it seems to move in a circle. But anyone who pays careful attention will see that the circle is really a spiral that keeps getting smaller. The question is examined on all sides until a solution is finally found.

This is what also goes on in the book of Job—except that it is the Lord who has the last word. After all the meaningful words and empty words have been uttered, the One who created the world and upholds it, the One who directs and controls human life, the One who gives real meaning and purpose to the existence of the faithful steps onto the stage.

In a work of this size, it is impossible to go into the book of Job verse by verse. But there are a number of things I would like to point out to you to help you find your own way through the book. Keep a pencil handy, and underline whatever moves you especially or strikes you as central to the reasoning of Job and his friends. The Bible, after all, is a workbook. The layman must form his own impressions of it.

A moral appeal. Eliphaz is the first to speak. In his words we already encounter the attitude that the other two friends were to take, namely, that Job could not have been

afflicted so severely without reason. He must have something on his conscience.

Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?
Or where were the upright cut off?
As I have seen, those who plow iniquity
and sow trouble reap the same.
By the breath of God they perish,
and by the blast of his anger they are consumed (4:7-9).

Eliphaz thought he was on solid ground in suggesting this explanation. Job, he assumed, was being set straight.

[16] Eliphaz claimed to have received a vision. During the night, a frightening form appeared before him and whispered:

Can mortal man be righteous before God?
Can a man be pure before his Maker? (4:17).

At this point I will not go into the question whether Eliphaz received a *real* vision. The sermon he preaches on this text is a *moral* appeal: he presses Job to confess his guilt, on the assumption that Job had committed some special sin. But this is just what Job refused to admit.

Rash words. Job was deeply disappointed by the way his friends analyzed the problem. Naturally, he did not deny that he had uttered some rash words (6:3). No doubt he thought of how he had cursed the day of his birth. But why was his affliction so great? The Almighty had shot His arrows into Job—but why? That was Job's problem —why? Yet his friends refused to see this.

Wilt thou not look away from me for an instant?
Wilt thou not let me be while I swallow my spittle?
If I have sinned, how do I injure thee,
thou watcher of the hearts of men?
Why hast thou made me thy butt,
and why have I become thy target? (7:19-20 NEB).

A man full of talk. Bildad did not base his words on a vision; he appealed to the wisdom of earlier generations instead. God will not reject a blameless man, he argued (8:20). And Zophar had little to add to what the other two had said. Why was Job so intent on being vindicated? Zophar scolded Job:

Should a multitude of words go unanswered,
[17] and a man full of talk be vindicated?
Should your babble silence men,
and when you mock, shall no one shame you?
For you say, "My doctrine is pure,
and I am clean in God's eyes."
But oh, that God would speak,
and open his lips to you ... (11:2-5).

Job would have to examine his life and conduct thoroughly and then confess his sin. Since Zophar did not want to be accused of being a "man full of talk" himself, he made his first speech short. His second was not very long either, and he never got around to saying anything in the third round of speeches.

Defending God. Job used cutting sarcasm in his answer: "No doubt you are perfect men and absolute wisdom is yours!" (12:2 NEB). Even if his complaints about God's arbitrariness were not understood by his friends, Job was not about to be bullied into confessing some special sin and guilt.

Job's friends wanted to defend God and plead His case. They gave what they thought were God's reasons for burdening Job with one affliction after the other. But Job did not answer this theodicy, this justification of God's ways. His friends were poor advocates of

God's cause.

Let him kill me if he will; I have no other hope
than to justify my conduct in his eyes.
This very boldness gives promise of my release,
since no godless man would dare appear before him.
You shall see, I will proceed by due form of law,
persuaded, as I am, that I am *guiltless* (13:15-16, 18 JB).

[18] 4. Second Round of Speeches

Unjust treatment. One thing became unmistakably clear in the first round of speeches: the issue is one of justice. The friends accuse Job of having committed some grievous sin. He must have something on his conscience, or else he wouldn't have suffered all these afflictions. But Job not only feels that his friends are attacking him, he also feels that *God* is treating him unjustly. All the same, he *cannot* let go of God.

In his second speech, Eliphaz returns to the same old refrain. Not even the angels are pure before God. Hence a mere man can hardly claim to be blameless. Moreover, history shows that the godless are punished for their wickedness.

Glorious inconsistency. Job cannot contain himself any longer and finally bursts out: "Miserable comforters are you all" (16:2). On the one hand, he calls God his opponent, his enemy. Yet, in glorious inconsistency he continues to cling to this same God. He struggles with God and tries to force Him to act justly!

O earth, cover not my blood,
and let my cry find no resting place.
Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven,
and he that vouches for me is on high.
My friends scorn me;
my eye pours out tears to God,
that he would maintain the right of a man with God,
like that of a man with his neighbor (16:18-21).

Job's struggle comes to clear expression in these words. He seeks vindication in the face of the accusations made by his friends, but his struggle is also with God — the God who [19] has not dealt justly with him. God must plead his case with God, as it were. Job cries out for a Mediator, a pledge. He says: "Be thou my surety with thyself, for who else can pledge himself for me?" (17:3 NEB).

Job's indignation. When Bildad, in his second speech, once again waxes eloquent about the punishment of the godless, Job refuses to give in:

Suppose that I have gone astray,
suppose I am even yet in error:
it is still true, though you think you have
the upper hand of me
and feel that you have proved my guilt,
that God, you must know, is my *oppressor*,
and *his* is the net that closes around me (19:4-6 JB).

Then Job, the man who cursed the day of his birth, becomes indignant. To his fellow human beings he is as loathesome as a worm; they cannot bear the sight of him. He seems to have been condemned by God. Yet he continues to cling to the invisible God.

Have pity on me, my friends, have pity,
for the hand of God has struck me.
Why do you pursue me as God does?
Will you never get enough of my flesh?
Oh, that my words were recorded,
that they were written on a scroll,

that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead,
or engraved in rock forever!
I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God;
I myself will see him
with my own eyes—I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me! (19:21-27 NIV).

[20] Job clings to the conviction that there will be a Redeemer, someone who will avenge him. In the midst of death and suffering, he catches a glimpse of the Messiah!

A source of life and resurrection. The beautiful thing about this passage is that Job sees *life issuing from justice*. Isn't Christ the ultimate answer to Job's complaints? Christ is the one through whom God's justice was satisfied; He is the one who made man righteous before God by bearing our sins. That's why He is also a source of life and resurrection.

Christ arose from the grave for the sake of *our justification* (Rom. 4:25). It is not without reason that Job's words have become widely known in the New Testament church through Handel's "Messiah": "I know that my Redeemer liveth."

Zophar had no more comfort to offer Job than to say that the godless always perish after flourishing briefly. Job responds by saying that things don't always turn out that way. Even after their death, the godless are honored: their graves are cared for and guarded.

5. Third Round of Speeches

Galling words. Eliphaz now proceeds to speak some galling words:

Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous,
or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless?
Is it for your fear of him that he reproves you,
and enters into judgment with you?
Is not your wickedness great?

[21] There is no end to your iniquities.

For you have exacted pledges of your brothers
for nothing,
and stripped the naked of their clothing (22:3-6).

Eliphaz rattles on and on in this vein, but Job does not budge from his position. If only he could find God! God "knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (23:10).

Deeper than mine shafts. Bildad hammers on his old theme again: How could a man, a mere mortal, be righteous before God? (25:4; see also 4:17; 15:14). This doesn't cause Job to change his mind either:

I hold fast my *righteousness*, and will not let it go;
my heart does *not* reproach me for any of my days (27:6).

Job's insistence on his own righteousness and innocence doesn't solve his problem. On the contrary, he confesses that divine wisdom is beyond human grasp. It reaches deeper than mine shafts.

The Babylonians are wrong in claiming that human wisdom wells up from the depths. The only wisdom man is capable of is that he must fear the Lord and stay away from evil (ch. 28). Man is not able to answer life's riddles.

Misery and emptiness. Job finds the course of his own life a depressing subject to contemplate. In chapter 29 he sketches his former prosperity and then goes on in the next chapter to describe the misery and emptiness he now faces.

Be that as it may, he continues to insist that he is *righteous*. Not one of the base accusations made by Eliphaz is justified. Widows and slaves were safe around Job. He is even willing to raise his hand and swear an oath.

[22] (Again we seem to be in the courtroom.) Proudly he declares that he *is pure*:

Oh, that I had one to hear me!
(Here is my signature! let the Almighty answer me!)
Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary!
Surely I would carry it on my shoulder;
I would bind it on me as a crown;
I would give him an account of all my steps;
like a prince I would approach him (31:35-7).

6. Elihu against Job and His Three Friends

Fighting on two fronts. Job 32 is the beginning of a new section. A fresh figure appears on the stage—Elihu, a younger friend of Job. His relative youth has kept him from taking part in the discussion up to this point. Now that each man has spoken his piece, he also feels compelled to say something.

Elihu was angry, for Job made himself out to be more righteous than God and assumed the role of critic, daring to find fault with God. It was not that Elihu doubted Job's moral uprightness. On the contrary, he was likewise indignant at the words of the three friends, who threw the most horrible accusations at Job without proper grounds. In short, Elihu was fighting on two fronts at once.

New wine. Elihu begins with an appeal to the goodwill of his audience. He is only a young man, and therefore he has not taken part in the earlier discussion. Yet, he points out that wisdom is not a fruit of age but of the Spirit of the Lord. Now that the three friends have nothing more to say, he proposes to speak.

[23] He feels the need of speaking because he wishes to say something entirely different from what the others have said. What he feels within himself is like new wine threatening to burst out of the wineskin. He will show no partiality in what he has to say. Like the others, he is a mere mortal "formed from a piece of clay" (33:6).

More criticism of Job. The first theme he takes up is Job's claim that he is free of transgression while God is unrighteous. He cites Job's own words as recorded in 13:24,27.

Surely, you have spoken in my hearing,
and I have heard the sound of your words.
You say, "I am clean, without transgression;
I am pure, and there is no iniquity in me.
Behold, he finds occasions against me,
he counts me as his enemy;
he puts my feet in the stocks,
and watches all my paths" (33:8-11).

Elihu cannot agree with such language.

Behold, in this you are not right. I will answer you.
God is greater than man.
Why do you contend against him,
saying, "He will answer none of my words"? (33:12-13).

Here Elihu alludes to Job's remark in 30:20 to the effect that God does not answer him. Isn't Job attacking God's greatness, His superiority to man? Does *God* owe *us* an explanation of His deeds?

An Advocate. Elihu goes on to argue that God does speak to man — through dreams, night visions and sickness. He uses these means to teach man not to be proud [24] and

also to make him yearn for a mediator, for reconciliation. (This is a very important point.)

Elihu echoes one of the sentiments already expressed by Job: "There is no umpire between us" (9:33; see also 16:18-19; 19:25). Job in his suffering finds himself longing more and more for a Redeemer, a Mediator, an Advocate, the one in a thousand, a messenger sent out to stand by him: "Yet if there is an angel on his side as mediator, one out of a thousand, to tell a man what is right for him" (33:23 NIV). In other words, Job needs someone to show him the right path, someone to preach the necessity of repentance to him.

A message. Elihu is not one of the faultfinders; he does not join the others in concluding that Job must have committed some dreadful sin. Instead he allows for the possibility that Job's suffering has a message to convey. Perhaps it was intended to deepen his life, to teach Job in his frailty to live by *grace*.

Perhaps the message is that ransom and reconciliation must be achieved for each of God's children if they are to share in salvation. Paul writes: "I have nothing on my conscience; but that does not mean that I *stand acquitted*" (I Cor. 4:4 NEB). Like Paul, Job had nothing on his conscience—but he did protest that he was righteous.

Elihu does not find fault with this. Job has to learn not to be so sure of his own righteousness. We live by God's redemption alone (see 33:28).

Because Job does not respond to his first speech (ch. 33), Elihu continues, citing Job's words in 27:6.

Job says, "I am innocent,
but God denies me justice.
Although I am right,
I am considered a liar" (34:5-6 NIV).

[25] He also quotes Job's statements in 9:22 and 21:7-15 about the apparent meaninglessness of serving the Lord: "For he has said, 'It profits a man nothing that he should take delight in God' " (34:9). Elihu objects strongly to this attitude and declares: "Far be it from God that he should do *wickedness*, and from the Almighty that he should do *wrong*" (34:10).

The church's classroom. It appears that we are still in the courtroom. But since no man can serve as God's defense attorney, it would be better to say that we are in the church's classroom.

Elihu points out that God is the one who created everything and upholds His creation. In Him we live and move and have our being. He is in control of our destiny. Is it likely that *He* will deal with us unjustly? "Shall one who hates justice govern? Will you condemn him who is righteous and mighty?" (34:17). God is the Great King who has toppled proud men from their thrones and elevated the humble. He is the King of kings, and He will allow no tyrant to go his own way unhindered. Who is Job, then, to say such things about God?

In his third speech Elihu goes into Job's contention that the service of the Lord is a waste of time. Naturally, our deeds do not affect God. "Your wickedness touches only men, such as you are; the right that you do affects none but mortal man" (35:8 NEB). What could a man possibly give God? Yet, we must not forget about horizontal relationships, as though they make no difference. Our deeds have a definite effect on our fellow men.

Genuine prayer. As for Job's complaint that God does not answer prayer, Elihu wonders whether Job has prayed patiently enough. Was he really waiting upon the Lord? Or was it simply a matter of crying out when he was in need? If it was need that taught Job to pray, then his prayer was **[26]** not genuine. In a genuine prayer we ask: "Where is God my Maker, who gives songs in the night?" (35:10).

As we read this text, we cannot help but think of Paul and Silas in prison in Philippi.

Although they had been arrested in their attempt to establish a church on the continent of Europe, they sang hymns in the night (Acts 16:25). Was Job singing too?

Surely God does not hear an *empty cry*,
nor does the Almighty regard it.
How much less when you say that you do not see him,
that the case is before him, and you are waiting for him! (35:13-14).

Justice for the afflicted. Still Job does not answer. Since silence implies consent, Elihu continues by taking up a new theme. In 21:7 Job had said that God lets the godless live and even allows them to grow in strength. Elihu counters this by affirming that God does not withdraw His eyes from the righteous. No, He deals justly with the afflicted: "He does not keep the wicked alive, but gives the afflicted their right" (36:6). If the just find themselves in need, He does something for them—but in His own way: "He delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ears by adversity" (vs. 15).

That's what was happening to Job. Therefore Job should not act rebellious (36:18), nor should he express a longing for death (see ch. 3, 7 and 14).

Do not long for the night,
when peoples are cut off in their place.
Take heed, do not turn to iniquity,
for this you have chosen rather than affliction.
Behold, God is exalted in his power;
who is a teacher like him?
Who has prescribed for him his way,
or who can say, "Thou hast done wrong"? (36:20-3).

[27] *A song of praise.* Then Elihu sings about the Lord's greatness and the rule of the world's great governor, who cannot act unjustly. The One who directs the clouds and wind and rain, showing them where to go and when to stop, will surely guide your footsteps too, Job!

On the horizon, the cumulus clouds of a thunderstorm become visible. Elihu includes a description of those clouds among his words of admonition (36:27ff). He asks Job a long series of questions about nature. He concludes by saying:

The Almighty — we cannot find him;
he is great in power and justice,
and abundant righteousness he will not violate.
Therefore men fear him;
he does not regard any who are wise in
their own conceit (37:23-4).

7. Yahweh's Answer and Job's Restoration

A challenge for Job. Finally the Lord responds by speaking out of a storm. His words contain a challenge addressed to Job. Elihu had already raised questions that Job could not answer. The Lord now asked him more questions.

Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.
Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it? (38:3-5).

[28] The questions rained down on Job's head. What answer could the rash accuser give? Job said:

Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer thee?
I lay my hand on my mouth.

I have spoken once, and I will not answer;
twice, but I will proceed no further (40:4-5).

But the Lord addresses Job again from a storm. Once more he is challenged. Was God unrighteous? Was He in the wrong, while Job was in the right?

"African "features of the creation. More questions rain down on Job's head. This time God asks about the behemoth (hippopotamus) and the leviathan (crocodile). He confronts Job with some "African" features of the creation, in which His might and methods are revealed.

We are accustomed to ascribing the ferocity of the wild beasts "after their kind" to the fall into sin. Despite what we read in Genesis 1:21-5, we refuse to accept the fact that God saw what He had made and pronounced it very good. There are even some who blame the existence of sea monsters and wild animals on demonic influences *before* the fall. In fact, however, it is *because* of the fall that we turn the Garden of Eden into an idyllic Persian paradise along the lines of a honeydewed Hollywood movie. Think, for example, of all the sentimental pictures of "Paradise" in which it is forgotten that the Garden of Eden was a special piece of cultivated land within a wild plain—and not a zoo full of tame animals.

God's imprint. The Lord's words to Job are intended to correct some of our sentimental thinking about the creation and the Creator. The Lord is the God who created such strange, gruesome creatures as the hippopotamus and the crocodile. These animals bear the mark of His ^[29] imprint — even though we shrink from recognizing them as the work of His hands. The Lord is the one who created such natural forces as thunder and storms, who gave the lion his hunter's instincts and the ostrich his strange habits.

God's thoughts are too deep for us to fathom! His thoughts are higher than ours, for we would rather concern ourselves with such gentle creatures as cooing pigeons. His methods in creation and His governing of this world's events do not fit in with our preconceived ideas.

The last chapters in the book of Job represent a rich lesson in natural history for all of us. Just as we cannot gain a full knowledge of the Creator from the creation, we cannot understand God on the basis of His will for our lives. Just as God's incomprehensible creation with all its conflicting natural forces and overwhelming manifestations of power is "very good," His kingship and rule over this battered and confused life full of riddles is "very good."

Job's retraction. Job bows his proud head. Earlier he approached his Creator with the boldness of a prince, but now he mumbles some of the Lord's words after Him like an insignificant creature. (The words in quotation marks in Job's response are taken directly from the Lord's speech.)

I know that thou canst do all things,
and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted.
"Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?"
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
"Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me."
I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees thee;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes (42:2-6, quoting 38:2, 3).

^[30] Naturally Job does not retract everything he has said. The Lord Himself says to Eliphaz: "You have not spoken of me what is right, as *my servant Job* has" (42:7). But Job does retract his challenge and his faultfinding attitude. His "knowledge" of God has been deepened greatly; he now knows that the Creator of all things is not subject to

human explanations, and that He delivers His own despite all appearances and obstacles.

A happy ending. Then comes the great reversal in Job's life. Things do not turn out for him the way his three friends had predicted. In fact, the three are admonished by the Lord, and Job has to step in on their behalf as mediator and intercessor. Before their faces Job is *elevated* and called "the servant of the LORD" (see Is. 52:13-15; Ps. 18:49).

In addition, Job is given twice as much as he possessed before. His relatives come to him and re-establish their relationships with him. The disharmony between Job and his wife disappears and children are born to them again.¹ Note that ten children died and ten were born after Job's period of affliction ended. Thus the number of newly born children is not doubled. The ten who had died still counted as Job's children.

The book of Job has a happy ending, then, as we see the righteous man blessed. It is made clear to us that Job's blessing is not a matter of *what he deserved* after all he had gone through but purely a matter of *grace*.

[31] 8. A Proclamation about the Justification of the Church

An impatient man. Job knew nothing about the heavenly background of his suffering, i.e. the conversation between God and satan. He was an impatient man and had to learn what it means to wait. His faith was tested as he learned to cling to the unseen God: "Now my eye sees thee" (42:5).

Over against his friends' teaching to the effect that man is merely God's slave, Job was allowed to see something of the wonder of *grace*. Although he clung to his insistence that he was righteous, he realized his need of a Redeemer, someone to bring about reconciliation and atonement for him.

The restoration of Job's wealth underscores the fact that Paul's words also apply to him: "They are justified by his *grace* as a *gift*, through the *redemption* which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24). In other words, we are purchased by Christ.

Job is spoken of in favorable terms in Ezekiel 14:14 and 20 as well as James 5:11. Yet, despite Job's famous patience and his gift of prayer, we may not elevate him above other men on the assumption that the book of Job is intended to present us with a great example.

In this book the Lord shows us how He enables the holy to *persevere*, how He is *close* to His church and vindicates her. If Job is doubly blessed after the suffering he went through—purely as a matter of *grace*, for Job first humbled himself—this shows the church that her way of the cross will ultimately lead to glory. After justification comes glorification. The way of the cross is the way of light.

God's ways. As for the "problem" of suffering, we must face the fact that we mortals will never understand [32] everything here on earth. All the same, we may know that there is indeed a heavenly "background" to human events and that God stands in satan's way. And we may also know that God's ways go beyond our understanding. He does not always do things in the way that we, in our sentimentality, would choose. God has created various things that are not "to our taste." Yet, what a mighty manifestation of God's glory we see in the dangerous leviathan!

The cross of Christ is not "to our taste" either; it offends and repels the natural man. Nevertheless, Christ our Redeemer, our surety of a better covenant, has purchased us by the strange way of the cross. The sufferings of this Redeemer are greater by far than the sufferings of Job.

"I know that my Redeemer lives." This means that satan can no longer enter heaven and complain. With Christ's ascension into heaven, the "accuser of our brethren" is cast

¹ Notice the names given to the daughters: Jemimah (dove), Keziah (cassia—see Ps. 45:8), and Keren-happuch (horn for make-up). Job was no ascetic.

down. Christ, as our heavenly Paraclete, our Advocate, defends our interests (see I John 2:2; Rev. 12:5-11). Although we continue to ask why, in Christ we are victorious in principle.

The world's midpoint. The eye trained by Scripture finds rich comfort in the seemingly chaotic phenomena of nature. God is constant in the method He chooses to realize His intentions. We see this in Job on his heap of ashes, in Christ on Golgotha, and in the church of the last days as it is turned into a theater, a spectacle for the world to behold.

The book of Job is a beautiful piece of prophecy that gives the church reason to sing about its justification, sanctification, and complete redemption in Christ. Dr. K. Sietsma writes:

Job stands there before us at the midpoint of God's world, as an embodiment and depiction of God's ^[33] restored world—in short, as God's true world in miniature. Therefore Job is the world's midpoint in the fullest sense. He represents the justified people of the LORD, the people whose sins are forgiven on the basis of grace, the people who are protected against the accuser by God's justifying verdict of acquittal. Job is the concentration point of the people of Christ, the people who pray and worship, the people for whose sake the Sodom of this world is not yet cursed and wiped out. But he is also the incarnation of the meek, who, as Christ informs us, will inherit the earth. As a prophetic expression of the reality of the promise that the meek shall inherit the earth, Job receives a double portion of earthly blessing; he receives the portion of the first-born in place of the whole. As you know, the first-born's portion represents the whole. ²

² *De Zelfrechtvaardiging Gods* (Amsterdam, 1939), pp. 125-6.

[34] Psalms

1. Superscriptions and Basic Divisions

Five parts. *Psalmos* is a Greek word that means *song* or perhaps *song sung to the accompaniment of a harp*. The Hebrew word translated into English as *psalms* really means *songs of praise*.

The book of Psalms includes a number of lamentations and songs of supplication as well. In the final analysis, however, all the psalms sing the praises of Israel's God. Israel fled to the Lord in time of need and recognized Him as its helper in time of trouble.

The book of Psalms as we find it in our Bible is divided into five parts. Just as we speak of the five books of Moses, we could speak of the five books of Psalms. It may well be that this division has something to do with the division of the Torah (the law); the idea that the Psalms and the "law" are closely related would then be reflected in the fact that both are divided into five books. In the division of the Psalms found in the Revised Standard Version, each "book" ends with a special "doxology":

[35]

Book I is made up of Psalms 1-41, which are chiefly psalms of David. The doxology is 41:13.

Book II is made up of Psalms 42-72 and includes psalms of David as well as some psalms from Levitic circles. The doxology is 72:18-19.

Book III is made up of Psalms 73-89, which are mainly Levitic psalms. The doxology is 89:52.

Book IV is made up of Psalms 90-106 and includes a psalm of Moses, some psalms of David, and several psalms by anonymous authors. The doxology is 106:48.

Book V is made up of Psalms 107-150. It includes the "songs of ascents" and a number of hallelujah psalms by David, Solomon and anonymous authors. The doxology is all of Psalm 150.

A commentary on Israel's history. Clearly the book of Psalms is a collection that draws on sources that have since been lost. In the historical books of the Old Testament we also find "psalms," such as the songs of Moses, Deborah, Hannah, and Hezekiah. It may well be that some of the psalms in the book of Psalms were originally recorded in other historical books.

Some psalms of David include a description of the situation in which they originated. If you compare Psalm 18 with David's psalm of praise in II Samuel 22, you will see that both were occasioned by the same event: the Lord had delivered David from all his enemies, including Saul. The circumstances behind other psalms are indicated in the superscriptions, e.g. the time when David fled from Saul (Ps. 34, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59) and later Absalom (Ps. 3).

We should be thankful for the superscriptions, for they enable us to read the Psalms as a beautiful commentary on Israel's history. The Psalms are even more eloquent and moving when we know the background and situation and find out more about the imperiled author as he begs for help.

[36] The same can be said of the psalms that were clearly intended for the great feasts and the services in the temple. It would do today's church a lot of good to recall that Israel sang the hallelujah psalms and the songs of ascents on festive occasions. The Psalms are by no means colorless songs, for they are deeply rooted in Israel's covenant history and service of its God.

2. Praising the Lord Responsively

Psalms with worldly melodies. Psalm 22 (the well-known psalm of suffering) and Psalm 9

(which was originally joined with Psalm 10) are often sung to "worldly" tunes. This combination of a holy psalm and a worldly melody should not shock us, for the Psalms as they originally arose were central to Israel's life.

We must not think in terms of a group of priests solemnly singing a psalm as we might sing a chorale, complete with the unnatural gestures that some people seem to regard as appropriate to spiritual songs. In those days things had not yet reached the point where "church music" was brought into relation with such pieces as Handel's "Largo."

We do not know just *how* Israel sang. Sometimes we find the word *Selah* in the text. Its meaning is not clear. Did it mean that the last line should be repeated? Could it be that it functioned as a *fortissimo* for the singers and/or accompanists? In any case, the word must have something to do with music. There are other references to music in the Psalms: "To the choirmaster" or "With stringed instruments" and so forth.

Singing and speech. For the people of the East, speech ^[37] itself is a form of singing. If you listen to the singing in Jewish synagogues today (which is not unlike the Gregorian chant of the Roman Catholic Church and the liturgical recitations of Eastern Orthodox churches and Mohammedan mosques), you get an impression of how Israel must have sung. In the temple, the singing was accompanied by a good-sized orchestra.

It is clear that some of the psalms were intended to be sung responsively. In Psalm 24, for example, various questions are posed by a certain singer or choir, while another singer or choir answers:

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?

He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false....

Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.

Who is the King of glory?

The LORD, strong and mighty,
The LORD, mighty in battle!

In Psalm 42 and 43, we find a certain refrain repeated:

Why are you cast down, O my soul
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

Such a refrain was apparently sung by everyone or by more singers than the other parts of the psalm. In Psalm 46 we also hear a refrain:

^[38] The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

This refrain comes after verses 6 and 10, but it may also belong after verse 3, given the presence of the word *Selah* in each of these places. Another well-known refrain is:

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures for ever.

This refrain occurs in Psalm 118 and 136.³ The "steadfast love" of which it speaks is really covenant faithfulness.

Isn't this something to rejoice over again and again? Israel did so when the temple was

³ We find such refrains in Ps. 49:12, 20; 56:4, 10-11; 59:9, 17; 62:2, 6; 80:3, 7, 19; 99:5, 9; 107:8, 15, 21, 31.

dedicated (see II Chron. 5:13; 7:3, 6) and in the days of Jehoshaphat during the campaign against the Ammonites and the Moabites (II Chron. 20:21). Jeremiah declared that this refrain would again be raised after the destruction of the city and the temple (Jer. 33:11), and in Ezra 3:11 we read how his prophecy was fulfilled: this refrain was sung when the foundation of the new temple was laid.

When you hear Gelineau's arrangement of Psalm 136 with its refrain accompanied by brass instruments ("Car son amour est eternal," i.e. "For His love is eternal"), you realize what a powerful proclamation this psalm can be. Rarely do we share in the intense joy it expresses; in fact, we could not possibly express such joy each time we sing this psalm.

Excessive restraint. We are rightly afraid of extravagance and sick sentimentality in worship, such as one finds among various sects noted for their "enthusiasm." Yet we should also be suspicious of any tendency toward ^[39] excessive restraint, even if it is based on the argument that we must not allow praying and praising the Lord for His covenant faithfulness to become tiresome activities.

Responsive singing in church is not forbidden; nowhere do we read in the Bible that we may not use brass instruments to accompany the singing in the worship services. The fact that the Salvation Army uses brass instruments should not keep us from doing the same. After all, we already have the sound of the trumpet issuing from the organs we use in worship. It is good to praise the Lord!

*But everything should be done in a
fitting and orderly way
(I Cor. 14:40 NIV).*

3. Structures Used in the Psalms

Prescribed patterns. The presence of all the refrains in the Psalms is significant. Although it might appear that the Psalms were composed and sung in a spontaneous manner, they were actually sung according to prescribed patterns. In fact, the entire book of Psalms is characterized by its *orderliness*.

The Psalms do not open the door to individualism and the expression of all sorts of private emotions; they do not lead to the confusion and chaos created by the enthusiasm of fanatics. Instead they give definite guidance to the individual and congregation engaged in worship.

The God of the Psalms is not a God of confusion or disorder (I Cor. 14:33). If you ponder the chaos of heathen festivals throughout the ages, you will gain an even deeper appreciation of the value of the book of Psalms as a guide to proper worship.

Don't forget that in heathendom, the ritual is often ^[40] conducted in a secret priestly language: the "layman" does not understand the "church Latin" used in the services. In Israel, by contrast, this was *not* the case: there was indeed a "clergy," but it did not speak a language incomprehensible to the "layman." In fact, many of the songs in the official liturgy were written by "laymen," e.g. David.

Alphabetic psalms. The structure of the alphabetic psalms is indicative of the order we find throughout the book of Psalms. Open the King James Bible to Psalm 119 and you will see that it is divided into sections called *Aleph*, *Beth*, *Gimel*, and so forth. These names are letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Each verse in the section called *Aleph*, for example begins with the Hebrew letter aleph. In this way Psalm 119 goes through the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Remember that we learn in Revelation 1:8 that God is the Alpha and the Omega. (Alpha and omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet.) In the Revised Standard Version's rendering of Psalm 119, the Hebrew letters naming the section are left out.

Other alphabetic psalms are 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, and 145. Each succeeding line begins

with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Note also that Psalms 33 and 103 have 22 verses, just as the Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters. The presence of these alphabetic psalms shows clearly that when it came to songs of praise and lamentation, Israel did not stumble down some path in a daze but allowed itself to be led from A to Z by the order of the One in whom "all things hold together" (Col. 1:17).

Rhyming contents. There is also order in the "rhyme schemes" used in the Psalms. In our discussion of the book of Job, we saw that the Israelites did not use the same rhyming patterns we use but strove for a rhyming of the content of two or more successive lines, which gives the successive lines a certain rhythmic form as well. This poetic ^[41] verse style is sometimes called *parallelism*, for the lines run parallel to each other.

A good example of this rhyme scheme is found in Psalm 114, in which the second line repeats the content or meaning of the first. Perhaps we could better say that it "echoes" the first line. When such poetic sections of the Bible are read aloud at the table after a meal, they will mean more if the second line is always read by a different person than the first, just as we use responsive readings in church. Try it once:

When Israel went forth from Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,
Judah became his sanctuary,
Israel his dominion.
The sea looked and fled,
Jordan turned back.
The mountains skipped like rams,
the hills like lambs.

The people of the ancient Near East had their own way of thinking and speaking. They were accustomed to repetition, which was never meaningless to them, for thoughts were being elaborated and defined more precisely. "The pit was empty, there was no water in it," we read in Genesis 37:24. This is an ordinary piece of information, but it is communicated to us in the style of parallel lines of verse. "Alas, I am a widow; my husband is dead," David was told by the wise woman of Tekoa, the city of the prophet Amos (II Sam. 14:5). This, too, is an instance of a parallel "rhyme."

I could point to a number of examples from the New Testament as well. (Think of the song of the angels in Luke 2:14.) Many of the words of Christ recorded in the "gospels" could likewise be presented on the printed page as lines of parallel verse, as could parts of the epistles and ^[42] the Revelation to John. Consider the following words of Jesus:

Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me,
but weep for yourselves and for your children.
For behold, the days are coming
when they will say,
"Blessed are the barren, and the womb that never bore,
and the breasts that never gave suck!"
Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us";
and to the hills, "Cover us" (Luke 23:28-30).

When lines of verse run parallel, the second can (1) *repeat* the thought of the first or (2) express an *opposed* thought or (3) *supplement* the thought of the first line. We find an example of each possibility in Psalm 1.

Blessed is the man who *walks* not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor *stands* in the way of sinners,
nor *sits* in the seat of scoffers.

Here we have the third kind of parallelism: the thought is developed through the verbs *walk*, *stand* and *sit*.

But his delight is in the law of the LORD,

and on his law he meditates day and night.

This is an instance of the first kind of parallelism: the thought of the first line is repeated in the second.

For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

This exemplifies the second kind of parallelism, for the thought in the second line contrasts sharply with that of the first.

[43] *A stairway.* There are more types of repetition to be noted in this most orderly book. Psalm 123, which is one of the songs of ascents, has been compared to a ladder or stairway: it is as though the psalmist, by repeating certain words, is putting down one foot after the other.

To thee I lift up my eyes,
O thou who art enthroned in the heavens!
Behold, as the eyes of servants
look to the *hand* of their master,
as the eyes of a maid
to the *hand* of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the LORD our God,
till he have *mercy* upon us.
Have *mercy* upon us, O LORD, have *mercy* upon us,
for we have had more than enough of *contempt*.
Too long our soul has been sated
with the scorn of those who are at ease,
the *contempt* of the proud.

In Psalm 121 we find a similar repetition, this time involving the words *help*, *keep* and *keeper*. Here repetition is the mother of a joyous awareness. In Psalm 122, the words *Jerusalem*, *tribes* and *thrones* are used twice, while *peace* (*shalom*) is used three times. There is also a play on words based on the fact that the name *Jerusalem* contains the word *salem* (which also means *peace*). The book of Psalms, then, is like the city of Jerusalem in that it was constructed with exceptional care and forethought.

4. Complacency in the Psalms?

The "righteous man." At this point we turn our attention to the various psalms and the major themes running [44] through them. First I would raise the question whether we should be willing to sing *all* the psalms today. Do we wish to echo *all* the sentiments we find in the Psalms?

There are indeed some moving and appropriate confessions of sin (e.g. Ps. 32, 51, 130), but how is it possible that we find such statements as the following in the very same book?

If thou triest my heart, if thou visitest me by night,
if thou testest me, thou wilt find no wickedness in me (17:3).

I hate the company of evildoers,
and I will not sit with the wicked.
I wash my hands in innocence,
and go about thy altar, O LORD.
But as for me, I walk in my integrity;
redeem me, and be gracious to me (26:5-6, 11).

All this has come upon us,
though we have not forgotten thee,
or been false to thy covenant (44:17; see also 59:4; 86:2).

Don't we hear a Pharisee speaking in these statements, a man who beats his breast and

boasts about his good works? Shouldn't we be repelled by any attitude of complacency, by the idea that "virtue" will earn immortality for us?

Indeed, no "flesh" will be justified by works. But what we encounter in such psalms is not a Phariseeistic reliance on good works but the figure of the "righteous man," which occurs repeatedly in the Psalms.

Hatred "without cause." To understand what a "righteous man" is, we should think back to the book of Job. Was Job without sin? Far from it. Yet he clung to his *righteousness*. "I hold fast my righteousness, and will ^[45] not let it go," he declared (Job 27:6). He knew that the Lord was his Redeemer, that he could count on Him, and that he would win out in his dispute because of his reliance on the Lord. The righteous know that the Lord stands up for them when they are tested.

In the Psalms we hear many complaints from people who are persecuted and hated "without cause" (37:7, 19; 69:5; 119:161). Of course there is some sort of "cause" behind the hatred—jealousy, hatred of another person's uprightness, and so forth. But this "cause" is neither defensible nor just. Therefore the person hated or persecuted appeals to the highest Judge in prayer. The servant of the Lord, the truly pious man, for whom life is not easy, knows that he is safe with God. God will give ear to his plea and vindicate him.

The "old days" could be very difficult times, as we see from the words of the poet who wrote Psalm 71. This psalmist reports that his enemies kept a close eye on him. But in the midst of his anxieties, this aged psalmist glories in the righteousness of the God who delivers him.

Our only anchor. This opens the way for understanding Psalm 119. Again, the poet is not a Pharisee boasting of his own virtue but a man who clings to God's Word and testimony as his only anchor.

Before I was afflicted I went astray;
but now I keep thy word (vs. 67).

In groups of eight verses, in which each verse begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the psalmist praises God's law, His Word and testimony. In these sections, he uses eight different words for the revelation of the Lord: commandments, precepts, statutes, ordinances, word(s), testimonies, promise(s), and laws (see vs. 41-8, 57-64, 65-72).

^[46] When you hear the word *law* in this context, you must not think of someone piling commandment upon commandment, rule upon rule. Rather, think of the law in terms of God's *righteousness* and gracious deliverance.

Thou hast appointed thy testimonies in righteousness and in all faithfulness (vs. 138).

Jesus Christ quoted this psalm (vs. 160) in His prayer as "High Priest" when He declared: "Thy word is truth" (John 17:17). In *His* hour of need, then, He clung firmly to the Father's Word. The message expressed so beautifully in the *order* of Psalm 119 is also the only comfort for us in our time of existentialism and a "new morality."

*Vindicate me, O God, and defend my
cause against an ungodly [covenant]
people (43:1).*

5. Enmity in the Psalms

Many "enemies." It appears that the psalmists had a lot of "enemies." Just who—or what—were these "enemies"?

In some instances the reference is clearly to *foreign* enemies who are marching on Jerusalem (Ps. 46, 48, 76) or have been defeated by Israel (Ps. 68). I will come back to

this point later, when we take up the Jerusalem psalms and the royal psalms. But in many other cases, the "enemies" are *within* the land and even within the church. They may be people who oppose the king's policies (e.g. King David) or people who bring false charges against a "righteous" person or start a smear campaign of slanderous whispers.

Such "enemies," then, come from within the church.

[47] Indeed, they may even be intimate friends, as in Psalm 41, where David talks about a friend whom he trusted, a friend who ate at his table (perhaps Ahithophel—see also II Sam. 15:31; Mark 14:18; and John 13:18, where the reference is to Judas).

Mistaken "spiritual" interpretations. Forewarned is forearmed. We should be aware that the Psalms are often wrongly interpreted and applied in a mistaken "spiritual" manner because of misunderstandings on this point. The enmity referred to in the Psalms is then interpreted as the world's evil in general, and the enemy is equated with "sinful humanity."

Such interpretations leave us with the impression that the evil is ultimately unreal, mere illusion. Consider the following words written about Psalm 10:

Is that really man? Is he in essence godless, an egoist through and through, unrelentingly cruel? Is that the true nature of man? We tremble momentarily as this thought sinks in. Could man's politeness and apparent friendliness be a mask concealing such a horrible nature? . . . This sketch of man is completely dominated by the thought of the dialogue between man and the invisible One whose mysterious Hand is busy intervening in our lives. Man and that Hand. Man doesn't see the Hand; he doesn't want to see it and cannot see it. The Hand hesitates and delays for a long time, but then it breaks through suddenly. Isn't that the deepest meaning of our existence? There lies the earthly city right by the mountain's slope, and in that city dwells man, the presumptuous one, a horrible creature who is never alone. Although he has great abilities in reasoning and thinking, he can never free himself from the grip of that mysterious Hand. Man and his impotence! ⁴

[48] If you now read Psalm 10 for yourself, you will soon see how the truth is suppressed in such commentaries. The focus of this psalm is not man in general but *David*, with whom the Lord had made a covenant. Enemies within the church attacked David as office-bearer. This psalm is not about the evil that pervades human life in general; rather, it complains about the activities of the "godless" (i.e. children of the covenant who have fallen away) and their conduct toward the downtrodden, the poor in spirit mentioned by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, the righteous who choose to stand on the Lord's side. In the end David finds comfort in Moses' song at the Red Sea, which is one of the psalms of the church: "The LORD is king for ever and ever" (vs. 16; see also Ex. 15:18; Rev. 11:15, 17; 12:10).

In a seventeenth century Dutch edition of the Bible, we find a summary of this psalm that hits the nail on the head. At that time, too, Humanism sought to give the Psalms a general human interpretation. But the men of the Reformation wanted nothing to do with any such "edifying" interpretation:

⁴ J. H. Bavinck, *Zeven Psalmen*, with illustrations by Eekman (published by the Bijbel-Kiosk Vereniging of Amsterdam). The purpose of this book is laudable, namely, to acquaint people outside the church with the Word of God. The illustrations are striking. In medieval style, one of the scoffers is given a tonsure: apparently the artist wanted to indicate that the scoffer is an "ecclesiastical" figure. Unfortunately, the church is nowhere to be found in the explanations of the text provided in this book. Nothing is said about the struggles of the church. Such a treatment does not help people outside the church, for remaining silent about the church when commenting on such psalms amounts to adapting the gospel to the mentality of modern man. Bavinck's book is a typical example of the general religiosity that seeks to move in the direction of existentialism and kills the Psalms in the process.

[49] David, or God's church, or David in the name of God's church prays in a fiery way against the persecution and oppression by the godless, vividly describing their pride, their godlessness, and their cruel, bloody practices. He cries out for God's righteous wrath, which assures him through faith of what God will do.

Psalm 10 is a prayer of the souls under the altar (Rev. 6:9-10; see also Ps. 10:8 and 9:13, which is in the same vein).

*He avenges the blood of his servants
(Deut. 32:43).*

6. Psalms of Imprecation

Just judgment. If you read the Psalms under the influence of the spirit of our age, you will have a hard time with the so-called psalms of imprecation (or wrath). Our egoistic hearts ask: "Isn't God a God of love? What kind of comfort could we possibly derive from such militant songs? Isn't their presence a clear indication that the Old Testament is far below the level of the New Testament?" Answering these questions is basic to our faith in God's self-revelation.

In Scripture God is not called "our dear Lord" but the "God of the covenant." If you consider some of the things we read in Deuteronomy, for example, you will realize that our covenant God approaches us not only with covenant *promises* but also with covenant *wrath*. The Great King judges justly.

David and the other psalmists appeal continually to God's covenant faithfulness. Their appeal is a request not for the intervention of some mysterious "Hand" but for [50] the protection of their Father's hand against those who violate the covenant.

Tabernacle language. In Psalm 10 we read: "Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up thy hand; forget not the afflicted. Break thou the arm of the wicked and evildoer" (vs. 12, 15). The word *arise* is tabernacle language. Whenever God's tent was taken apart so that the Israelites could journey farther in the wilderness, Moses would say: "Arise, O LORD, and let thy enemies be scattered" (Num. 10:35; see also Ps. 3:7; 7:6; 17:13; 68:1; 132:8; Acts 7:56).

When we ponder the fact that Jesus also "arose" from the grave, we realize that He arose not just to deliver us but also to judge the righteous, that is, to "justify" and vindicate us. The other side of this amazing acquittal, then, is the sevenfold covenant judgment on those who fall away (see Lev. 26).

The Great King. We should bear in mind that the language of the covenant draws on the "great king" style. Yahweh is characterized as the Great King who judges all the nations (7:8; 9:8; 10:16; 56:8; 59:5). We could almost say that these are stereotyped terms. They represent the language a subject would use in addressing a monarch in the ancient Near East.

We must not jump to the conclusion that the words of judgment we read in a particular psalm are directed at pagans who do not know God's name. When David, plunged into misery because of Saul or Absalom, appeals to God's power over all men, he asks first and foremost for covenant wrath to strike his enemies *within the church*.

Curses "fulfilled." Psalm 69 is a psalm of suffering that comes up repeatedly in the gospels because the sufferings it describes were experienced by Christ. Yet this psalm, too, is full of heavy curses. Its maledictions do not come out of [51] thin air; they are drawn from the *statute of the covenant*. Hence they were "fulfilled" in the Messiah.

Not only did Jesus have to drink vinegar and be consumed by enmity because of His zeal for His Father's house (69:21, 9) and be hated "without cause" (vs. 4; John 15:25), He also joined in David's *curses*. Hence Peter applies verse 25 of this psalm to Judas in Acts 1:20, where we read: "Let his habitation become desolate." Paul quotes verses 23-4 and applies them to the Jews who would have nothing to do with the gospel:

Let their table become a snare and a trap,
a pitfall and a retribution for them;
let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,
and bend their backs for ever (Rom. 11:9-10; see also Acts 28:27).

When we read in Revelation about the seven bowls of wrath poured out on the apostate church (unfaithful Jerusalem), this wrath of the Lamb gives us a visual representation of what the Jews used to say at the Passover when they raised their glasses:

Pour out thy indignation upon them,
and let thy burning anger overtake them (69:24).

Yahweh avenges the blood of His servants because of the *statute of the covenant*.

Below the New Testament level? Psalm 137, a veiled song of praise to Jerusalem during the exile, has long been regarded as offensive. Strong language is used at the very beginning of this psalm, and at the end we read a powerful cry for vengeance:

[52] Happy shall be he who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rock!

These words often give rise to feelings of revulsion. It is argued that the poet, despite his zeal for God's house, remains below the level of what the New Testament asks of us.⁵ In any event, that's how we react to this psalm when we approach it on the basis of *our feelings* alone.

This reaction is not Scriptural. All the psalmist was doing was repeating the prophetic curse and testifying to the comforting hope that lived within him. If we were to drop Psalm 137 from the Bible, we would also have to eliminate many of Isaiah's prophecies about Babylon.

The New Testament points back to this psalm. Didn't Christ allude to it when He spoke to the weeping women of Jerusalem? (Luke 23:28). And in Revelation 18:6 we hear a voice speaking about "Babylon" in the style of Psalm 137: "Pay her back in her own coin, repay her twice over for her deeds! Double for her the strength of the potion she mixed!" (Rev. 18:6 NEB).

Thus Psalm 137 is not "below" the level of the New Testament. It would be more accurate to say that the New Testament continues the lines begun in the Old Testament—including the line of thought in Psalm 137. "Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me" (35:1). This is a prayer that the church of our day must pray as well.

"Do I not hate them that hate thee, O LORD?" (139:21). This text, too, applies to believers living in the days of the new covenant, for what Christ valued in the church at Ephesus was that it *hated* the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which He also hated (Rev. 2:6). When we read the prayer "Search me, O God . . . and see if there be any wicked way [53] in me" (139:23, 24), we are not to detach these "edifying" words from the "hatred" in the preceding verse.

Covenantal hatred. The church that does not learn to hate—in a covenantal way—what its King hates is on the wrong path. "If any one has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed," writes Paul (I Cor. 16:22). He also declares: "If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:9; see also II Tim. 4:14).

The hatred the Bible requires of us is not a *personal* hatred. "Beloved, never avenge yourselves" (Rom. 12:19). It's not a matter of *our* rights or of what our personal enemies deserve. The real issue is the rights of *the Lord*, the God of the covenant. The enemy we must hate is *His* enemy! The enemies of Christ must be our enemies as well.

⁵ See, for example, A. Noordtzij, *Het Boek der Psalmen*, Vol. II (Kampen, 1935, "Korte Verklaring"), p. 236.

*O keep my soul and deliver me
(Ps. 25:20 KJV).*

7. Petition and Thanksgiving

The "soul." The Hebrew word that is usually translated into English as *soul* actually has a much broader meaning; it refers to our entire life, our existence, our personhood. Therefore, when we come across the word *soul* in the Psalms, we must apply it not just to the "soul" or to "spiritual life" but to human existence as a whole. A prayer raised for the deliverance of the soul is really a prayer for a blessing over all of our existence, which includes "the body."

In Psalm 66, which is a psalm of thanksgiving, we hear the psalmist tell the story of his deliverance (vs. 8-15), after ^[54] the usual introduction (vs. 1-7). He then moves on to the "application," that is, the invitation to the bystanders to agree with him, saying: "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for *my soul*" (vs. 16 KJV).

These words of the psalmist must not be understood as referring to some sort of "conversion" or "spiritual experience." The psalmist himself says that he already fears the Lord. What, then, did the Lord do for him, for his "soul"? The Lord delivered him from great dangers—and all Israel with him.

The suffering of his people was *his own* suffering: "Thou didst let men ride over *our* heads" (vs. 12). The people's suffering was an attack on the psalmist's "soul" and drove him to prayer. Behold, the God of the exodus heard him (vs. 6).

The militant church. In the psalms we find no individualistic "conversion stories." The "I" we read about is the "I" of the *church*; indeed, the *Head* of the church, Jesus Christ, expresses Himself in the Psalms. Isn't He ultimately the sole Author of Israel's psalter?

That's why the inscription above the book of Psalms in Bibles printed during the Reformation era always pointed out clearly that the voice speaking in the Psalms is not just a pious individual but the militant church. Ultimately, God's Son speaks to us in the Psalms. If we bear this in mind, we will not make the mistake of declaring certain Psalms our "favorites." All of them will be deeply meaningful to us.

Psalm 22. As we consider the Psalms, we might want to distinguish between psalms of petition and psalms of thanksgiving. Yet, various psalms include both these elements. Think, for example, of Psalm 22, which is both a psalm of suffering and one of petition.

^[55] In some respects this psalm was literally fulfilled in Christ, who was scorned by men, despised by the people, and forsaken by God. He was tormented by thirst (John 19:28), His hands and feet were literally pierced, and His clothes were divided. At Golgotha the sufferings described in this psalm were realized more fully than David could ever have imagined.

But there is a second section in this psalm, which was also fulfilled in Christ. What strikes us about the resurrection story is that Jesus declares that its message must be passed on to His *brethren* (Matt. 28:10; John 20:17; see also Heb. 2:11), by which He means His disciples, His church. Here He alludes to the second section of Psalm 22, that is, the song of *thanksgiving* that follows the *lamentation* in the first part. The first words of the lamentation express the depths of His suffering: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" But the first words of the song of thanksgiving give voice to His Easter triumph: "I will tell of thy name to my brethren" (vs. 22). When Christ declared on the cross, "It is finished," we can regard these words as a reference to the conclusion of Psalm 22: "He has wrought it."

Songs for all Israel. A psalm of petition always begins with an *appeal* to the name of the Lord. Then follows the *complaint* and the *prayer for deliverance*. Meanwhile, other reasons for expecting help are also mentioned, e.g. God's faithfulness in the past, and the fact that the psalmist is a servant of the Lord. The plea is often accompanied by a

promise of thanksgiving after the prayer has been answered.

Check this in various psalms, and you will see again how much order there is in the Psalms. Nowadays we tend to hold it against a minister if he has "points" in his sermon, but the psalmists certainly were not afraid to use a definite structure.

[56] You will also see that the distinction between personal psalms of petition and psalms in which a petition is presented on behalf of the entire people of Israel is not easy to draw. When David sends up his prayer to the Lord, he cannot cut himself off from his people. Therefore his prayers became songs sung regularly by all Israel.

Historical references. In psalms meant as national confessions of sin, the history of Israel comes strongly to the fore (Ps. 44, 74, 77, 80, 81, 106). The Lord is addressed as the God of the exodus.

It has sometimes been suggested that when the psalms are rhymed and put to music for us to sing in church, all the historical references should be removed. If this were done, however, we would be left with timeless, colorless songs. All too easily we would forget that the Psalms are songs of the *covenant*. Don't forget that God also appears in the Psalms as the God of Jacob.

Think of the comfort Asaph derived from contemplating God's deeds in the past (Ps. 77). In Psalm 78, which is a didactic psalm, Asaph declares:

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth!
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us.
We will not hide them from our children,
but tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders which he has wrought (vs. 1-4).

Israel turning to the Lord. In psalms of thanksgiving, we also encounter a certain order. Such psalms always begin with an announcement: "I will tell of thy name to my brethren" or "Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth" [57] (66:1). Others are called on to sing along: "Sing to him a new song" (33:3). Then follows the story of deliverance, the words of thanksgiving, and sometimes an appeal to the hearers to join in giving thanks. "The upright see it and are glad" (107:42).

Here again we can speak of personal psalms and psalms in which the psalmist speaks on behalf of the entire nation. Yet, the distinction between the two is often hard to draw. In essence, what we find in the book of Psalms are the psalms of *Israel*. They illustrate how Israel turned to the Lord when it suffered sickness, was threatened with death, faced false accusations, or was attacked by enemies.

Then I called on the name of the LORD:
"O LORD, I beseech thee, save my life!"
Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.
What shall I render to the LORD
for all his bounty to me? (116:4, 7, 12).

8. Songs of Praise to Yahweh

Witnesses to the covenant. There are some psalms that we could characterize as songs of praise or hymns. They were not composed because of some recent deliverance but sing of God's works in creation and re-creation, in the past, the present and the future. They begin and end with an appeal to sing praises to Yahweh. Hallelu-Jah! Praise Yahweh! They also give us the reasons why Yahweh is so worthy of praise.

First of all, the Lord is praised as the Creator. The inadequate term *nature psalms* has sometimes been applied to these psalms of praise (i.e. Ps. 8, 19, 33, 104, 147, 148).

[58] This term is inadequate especially because it introduces into the Bible the dangers of the distinction between nature and grace. On the basis of this distinction, Psalm 19 has been cut neatly into two sections: the first part is about the creation (nature), while the second part is about the law of the Lord—as though the law (grace) were somehow higher than "nature."

This approach does not do justice to Psalm 19, for Israel never viewed nature as something in itself. The Torah (the law) began in Genesis 1 by telling how God created the world. When Israel looked at the heavens, it did not see the work of a god of nature; what it saw was the work of the fingers of Yahweh, the God of the covenant (8:3, 1; 33:6; 147:4). Wasn't Abraham told to look at the stars as a guarantee, since his seed would be as numerous as the stars of the heavens?

The sun, moon and stars (i.e. the heavens) were witnesses to the covenant between the Lord and His people, between the Lord and David (Deut. 31:28; 32:1; Mic. 6:1-2; Jer. 33:20ff; Ps. 89:36-7). This is what unifies the two "sections" of Psalm 19: the day (sun) and the night (moon and stars) speak to us in an abundant and overflowing way as witnesses to the covenant. *They* are the ones who declare that the torah, the law of the Lord, is perfect.

The so-called "nature psalms," then, are really psalms of the covenant. In accordance with the promise of Matthew 24:14, Paul can calmly apply the first part of Psalm 19 to the preaching of the gospel to the Jewish synagogue: "Their voice [i.e. the voice of the witnesses to the gospel] has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world" (Rom. 10:18). The preachers of the gospel were witnesses to the covenant; they were colleagues of the sun, moon and stars. (The "testimony to all nations" mentioned in Matthew 24:14 is a "covenant testimony.")

Yahweh praised as King. What are the reasons for [59] praising the LORD? (Note that I speak of "the LORD," i.e. Yahweh—and not of a supreme being in general.) We praise Him for the seven thunderclaps of His voice. (In Psalm 29 the "voice of the LORD" is mentioned seven times.) We praise Him also because He sustains the world, because He controls what happens in our lives, because He saves Israel again and again, because He preserves Jerusalem, because He is King (Ps. 145).

Yes, Yahweh is praised as King! Beautiful hymns are sung about His kingship; we hear the sort of language we would expect from a throng gathered around the throne of a newly crowned king (Ps. 93, 96, 97, 98, 99).

A prayer of Moses. The last verse of Moses' song by the Red Sea (Ex. 15:18) is echoed in various ways in the Psalms. Psalm 90 is a prayer of Moses, the man (prophet) of God. The Psalms that follow it in our Bible repeatedly draw on the songs of Moses. It is striking that they remind us not only of the first song of Moses (which celebrated the Lord's kingship) but also of the last (Deut. 32). Just as in Moses' last song, the Lord is spoken of as a "rock" (92:15; 95:1).

The secret of Israel's liturgy is that it is firmly anchored in redemptive history. Israel's liturgy confesses the glory and power of its Great King. The Israelites worshiping in the temple knew that Israel was a great conqueror; in the temple music, they heard all about God's victory.

However perilous Israel's situation might be, there was always ground for hope. Israel's future never looked completely black. Yahweh was King; He had become King. "While thou, LORD, dost reign on high eternally, thy foes will surely perish" (92:9 NEB). He will come to judge the earth. Praise the Lord!

[60] 9. Jerusalem Psalms

The songs of ascents. That the psalter includes a number of Jerusalem psalms should

come as no surprise. The songs of ascents formed the hymnbook of Israel's pilgrims. These psalms have also been spoken of as the "songs of the steps," on the assumption that they have something to do with the steps of the temple. It is clear that this group of songs (Ps. 120-134) played a role in the annual pilgrimage to the temple.

The first of them speaks of a sojourner staying in Meshech (near the Black Sea). In Psalm 121, the Lord is sketched as the great Shepherd who keeps the night watch with His sheep. Psalm 122 records the joyous entry into Jerusalem.

After all sorts of songs about the blessings granted by the God of Zion, this group of psalms closes with a song in which a priestly blessing for the departing pilgrims is heard. The last thing we see in our mind's eye is the priest stretching out his hands in blessing. "O that deliverance for Israel would come out of Zion!" (14:7). "May the LORD bless you from Zion" (134:3; 128:5; 133:3). Israel is to fix its hope on Yahweh—and not on some deceptive human Pandora's box. In this hope Israel will not be put to shame.

The Immanuel promise. Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (1529) was inspired by one of the Jerusalem psalms (i.e. Ps. 46). The background of this psalm was the attack on the city of God made by the Assyrian king Sennacherib.

Later apostate prophecy turned the Immanuel promise of this psalm ("God with us") into a reason for false security. Jerusalem, it was argued, would never fall to the enemy. But Jeremiah made it clear that the Lord might well fight against His own city (Jer. 21).

[61] For the true church, the promise (which is also reflected in Ps. 48) stands: the city of the Great King will never be taken by the enemy. Gog and Magog will be defeated (Rev. 20:7-10; see also Ezek. 38-39). "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God" (46:4; Rev. 22:1; Ezek. 47:1ff).

From Sinai to Zion. Psalm 68 is sometimes called the "Huguenot psalm." David begins this psalm with the words spoken by Moses in the wilderness whenever the ark set out again, although he does not quote them exactly as they appear in Numbers 10:35. It may be that this psalm has something to do with the entry of the ark into Jerusalem.

From Sinai the Lord went to His mountain of Zion, which He chose above all other mountains. The purpose of the exodus and the entry into Canaan was to establish Israel's holy place on Jerusalem's mountain—hence the movement from Sinai to Zion. This psalm was finally fulfilled in Christ, who ascended into heaven and was seated at God's right hand, subjecting all opposition and giving rich gifts to His church (Eph. 4:7ff; see also Ps. 47 and 132).

The "songs of Zion." The New Testament does not include a separate book of Psalms, for the Old Testament psalms are also intended for *our* use and edification. Aren't we children of the promise, children of the heavenly Jerusalem, which is free and is our mother? (Gal. 4:28, 26). Aren't we on our way to the heavenly Jerusalem (the city of the living God) and Mount Zion? (Heb. 12:22).

All the "songs of Zion" (137:3) are for us to sing. We should rejoice that redemptive history has advanced in Christ since these songs were sung in the temple, which was destroyed and rebuilt twice.

[62] 10. The Psalms and the Messiah

Psalm 2. The psalter opens with two psalms placed there expressly as an introduction. Psalm 1 tells us about the "two ways," and Psalm 2 is a royal psalm. Then come some psalms of David, including a morning song (Ps. 3), an evening song (Ps. 4), and another morning song (Ps. 5). We read a good deal about David's struggles, but also about the gentle peace that came over him.

Psalm 2 is an excellent psalm to place at the beginning. David walks in the way of the Lord (see Ps. 1). He is the king chosen by God.

When a king in the ancient Near East ascended the throne, he could count on opposition,

especially from his vassals. (Is it any different today?) In Israel there was also opposition to the lawful king: think of Saul's followers, Absalom, and so forth. But what does Psalm 2 say about this opposition? "He who sits in the heavens laughs" (vs. 4). Israel's king was the Lord's anointed. Opposition to him represented rebellion against the Lord, for it was *the Lord* who had made David king over Zion, His holy mountain. Of this king God said: "You are my son, today I have begotten you" (vs. 7).

Provisional fulfillment. In II Samuel 7 we read about the promise the Lord made to David through Nathan. Psalm 2 points back to this promise. Although David's kingship represented a provisional fulfillment of the promise, the real fulfillment came in Jesus, the anointed Son of God, which is why Psalm 2 speaks of "my son" and the Lord's "anointed."

The Pentecost church can well sing Psalm 2 in its hour of need (Acts 4:24ff). Revelation depicts Jesus as the King who will smash His enemies with His iron staff as though they were mere vessels of clay (Rev. 12:5; 19:15; see also Ps.2:9).

[63] When we read New Testament passages about Jesus as the "Son of God," we should think of this psalm. And when we use the name *Christ*, we should bear in mind that it means *anointed*, the word used in this psalm. Christ is the anointed King.

Often we are thoughtless and superficial in our approach to Scripture. We fail to realize that the New Testament also sings the melody of Psalm 2. "Kiss the king, lest the LORD be angry with you Happy are all who find refuge in him" (vs. 12 NEB). The entire psalter and all of the New Testament are given color by this psalm. "I believe in Jesus, *the anointed One*, God's only begotten Son."

Psalm 89. The third book of Psalms closes with Psalm 89, which also mentions the promise of David. It speaks of the anointing (vs. 20, 38) and of the first-born son (vs. 26-7). But its tone is entirely different from Psalm 2, for it is first and foremost a *lamentation*. The reason for lamenting is that the great promise of II Samuel 7 seems to be coming to naught. David's dynasty has been overthrown by enemies.

In this psalm there is no overweening pride or boasting. It was written by Ethan the Ezrahite (I Kings 4:31), who was a contemporary of Solomon. It may be that Ethan lived long enough to see Pharaoh Shishak of Egypt capture Jerusalem and loot the temple (I Kings 14:25ff), which was a punishment for Judah's sins. "How long, O LORD?" Ethan asked.

This was a cry for the coming of the true Messiah, who will see to it that the gracious, trustworthy promises to David (Is. 55:3; Ps. 89:49) and the covenant with Israel are fulfilled. Jesus Christ, who took upon Himself the suffering of David's house, is the answer to this psalm. "He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:33).

[64] *To God, the Lord, belongs escape from death (68:20).*

11. The Meaning of Deliverance in the Psalms

"Earthly" deliverance. In Jesus Christ the meaning of the Psalms becomes transparent. God's kingship is revealed. There is not one square inch of territory that He does not claim as His own.

We sometimes hear the complaint that the Psalms speak only of "earthly" deliverance, of rescue from mortal dangers, while remaining silent about our wonderful future, rarely mentioning it and leaving the whole matter vague. People who talk this way about the Psalms — or the entire Old Testament — proceed from the assumption that *this* life is essentially an illusion without much substance. Real life is life in heaven, and that's just what the Psalms seem to be silent about.

But who gives us the right to attach so little significance to earthly life? Hasn't this life been given to us by the Lord? Hasn't He made us responsible for what we do here? What the Psalms give us is a series of responses to God's Word. Theirs is not the language of people "in heaven" but of people who live in the midst of the perils and battering of human existence. From this hazardous existence they cry out to the Lord — and receive an answer. They know that the Lord will stand by His promises, that He will assume responsibility for them.

We should not complain that the deliverance spoken of in the Psalms is only "temporary." This is not a fair evaluation of the Lord's deeds. Deliverance from a particular peril at a certain point in time is intended as a sign that the Lord provides for His people and looks after them. In childlike faith we should then be led to conclude that the Lord will look after everything else too. Before the ^[65] eyes of His chosen ones, Yahweh will shatter every enemy, including death in all its forms.

The problem of life. There are some psalms that devote themselves expressly to the "problem" of death—or better, the problem of life. Psalm 49 is a "wisdom song" that reflects on the power of death, the enemy that spares no one. The rich fool also falls. We read: "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me" (vs. 15).

Psalm 73 speaks similar language. When Asaph enters the sanctuary, he discovers that the prosperity of the wicked is only a matter of appearance.

Thou dost guide me with thy counsel,
and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever (vs. 24, 26).

Isn't this a summary of everything unfolded in the New Testament?

Victory over death. David testifies in Psalm 16 that he is sure that his life will be spared long enough for him to carry out his task as king (see also I Sam. 25:29). Both Peter in his Pentecost address (Acts 2:25ff) and Paul in his address at the synagogue in Antioch (Acts 13:35ff) take this to be a prophecy about Christ's victory over death, the enemy that seemed capable of swallowing everything before it.

David declares: "Thou dost not give me up to Sheol" (16:10). Jesus Christ holds the "keys of Death and Hades" (Rev. 1:18). His church will not be locked inside the gates of Sheol. Jesus Christ will do what the Psalms speak of repeatedly, namely, *vindicate* His church.

^[66] The meaning of the Psalms is not limited to this life. The Psalms make us sing of God's promises—both for this life and for the life to come. They help us take our stand in this life through Jesus Christ and enable us to glory in the deliverance He has won for us.

[67] Proverbs

1. Wisdom from Above

Practical insight. A proverb (*mashal*) contains practical insight into life; it gives expression to a universally valid truth. The people of Indonesia say: "The coconut doesn't land far from the coconut tree." In the Netherlands one often hears: "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Ezekiel declares: "Behold, every one who uses proverbs will use this proverb about you, 'Like mother, like daughter' " (Ezek. 16:44). When we think along these lines, we say, "Like father, like son!" or, "A chip off the old block!"

Parallels. Archeologists have come up with many examples of ancient proverbs in their excavations in Egypt and other Near Eastern countries. Some scholars zealously point out the parallels between such proverbs and what we read in the Bible. A certain Amen-opet, who lived in the seventh or sixth century B.C., declared:

Do not carry off the landmark at the boundaries of the arable land,
[68] Nor disturb the position of the measuring-cord;
Be not greedy after a cubit of land,
Nor encroach upon the boundaries of a widow. ⁶

In the book of Proverbs we read:

Remove not the ancient landmark
which your fathers have set (22:28).

The LORD tears down the house of the proud,
but maintains the widow's boundaries (15:25).

Do not remove an ancient landmark
or enter the fields of the fatherless;
for their Redeemer is strong;
he will plead their cause against you (23:10-11).

Some time ago, the proverbs of a sage named An-cheshesjonq were published. They, too, are reminiscent of the book of Proverbs, for the sage declares that it is better to live in a small house that you own than in a large house that someone else owns, and that it is better to preserve a small amount of property than to squander a large amount.

The formal similarities between such proverbs and those found in the Bible shouldn't surprise us, for the Bible itself compares Solomon's wisdom to the wisdom of the wise men of the East and of Egypt. "Where then are your wise men?" Isaiah asks the land of the Nile (Is. 19:12), which was famous for wisdom. Jeremiah asks Edom:

Is wisdom no more in Teman?

[69] Has counsel perished from the prudent?
Has their wisdom vanished? (Jer. 49:7).

An international commodity. Wisdom, then, is an international commodity (see Jer. 50:35; 51:57). At the courts of the ancient Near East, there were teachers who gave instruction in practical wisdom for life. They gave good advice to each new generation of officials by drilling proverbs into them. Once the Israelites got a king and a royal court, there also appeared in their midst the figure of the teacher of wisdom, gathering and dispensing wisdom (*chokmah*). Proverbs is not the only book of wisdom literature in the Bible: Ecclesiastes, Job, and Psalm 49 also fall into this category.

In considering the parallels between the book of Proverbs and other wisdom literature, remember that two things that look the same from the outside are not always the same on the inside. When Ezekiel says, "Like mother, like daughter," he uses a *general* truth

⁶ "The Instruction of Amen-em-opet," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd edition, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 422.

to shed light on a *particular* incident in covenant history, namely, the rebellion of the unfaithful covenant people. And when the book of Proverbs speaks about maintaining the widow's boundaries, it is not making a declaration about universal human rights but is pointing to definite stipulations in the law of the Lord (Deut. 19:14; 27:17; see also Job 24:2; Hos. 5:10).

God's Word as background. The foundation of the book of Proverbs is the Lord and His chosen ones, His church. What we read in the book of Proverbs is the wisdom of Israel's Redeemer; this book gives us wisdom from above (James 3:17), a wisdom that cannot be equated with general human wisdom.

Tales about the gods form the background of the Egyptian proverbs, but the background of the Biblical proverbs is the Word of God. Indeed, we encounter Wisdom as a ^[70] person in the book of Proverbs. In the final analysis, the one speaking to us in this book is Jesus Christ, who is given to us by God as our wisdom (I Cor. 1:30).

He teaches us, poor fools that we are, how to stand firm in the midst of life with its dazzling variety and how to become wise unto salvation. If we don't listen as He speaks, we remain fools. "Yet wisdom is justified by all her children" (Luke 7:35).

2. The Beginning of Wisdom—for the Righteous

Main divisions. The book of Proverbs can be divided as follows. (1) Chapters 1-9 form an introduction. (2) In 10:1–22:16 we find proverbs of Solomon. In chapters 10-15, the contrast between the righteous and the godless is present in virtually every verse. (3) In 22:17–24:34 are recorded the sayings of certain wise men. (4) Chapters 25-29 give us more proverbs of Solomon. (5) In chapter 30 we read the words of Agur, the son of Jakeh. (6) In 31:1-9 we are given the words of Lemuel, king of Massa, "which his mother taught him." (7) In 31:10-31 we find the alphabetical song of the virtuous wife.

My "son." In the introduction, the teacher of wisdom speaks to his student and calls him his "son." You may recall that Jesus also addressed His disciples as His "children." In the ancient Near East, the teacher was always the "father" and the disciple sitting at his feet his "son." Paul also spoke of Timothy as his "child" (I Cor. 4:17; I Tim. 1:2; II Tim. 1:2; 2:1; see also Titus 1:4).

This does not conflict with Christ's rejection of the title *Father* (Matt. 23:9), for Paul points out that he, Paul, is a father by virtue of his work in spreading the gospel. To the ^[71] Corinthians he writes: "You have only one father. For in Christ Jesus you are my offspring, and mine alone, through the *preaching of the Gospel*" (I Cor. 4:15 NEB).

There is a similar bond between the teacher and the disciple in the book of Proverbs. This bond is determined by the Word of God, the wisdom of God, which is justified in its "children." The teacher declares: "My son, keep my words. Write them on the *tablet* of your heart" (7:1, 3; see also Jer. 31:33). The language of the covenant God is the background of the book of Proverbs.

Respect and childlike obedience. When we examine this introduction further, we see that the issue in Israel's book of wise sayings is not "universal" wisdom. The wisdom is intended for the *righteous* (see, for example, 3:33; 4:18; 11:10, 18-19), that is, the children of the covenant who wish to live in the *fear of the Lord*. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7).

This "fear" is not "Angst" or anxiety but a respect and childlike obedience. And this respect is not an awe we feel at the thought of a "supreme being" of undetermined nature, one who rewards the virtuous, but a fear of Yahweh, Israel's covenant God, who wishes to inscribe the book of His covenant upon the tablet of our hearts. Moreover, this "knowledge" is not purely intellectual awareness or rational wisdom but practical knowledge applicable to daily life. ⁷

⁷ Thanks to the efforts of Calvin, an academy was opened in Geneva in 1559. The rosettes in the

[72] *The ways of wisdom.* Note how often the words *way* and *path* appear in the introduction. Perhaps you should mark those passages in your Bible.

The *path* of the wicked (4:14) and the *way* of the foreign woman (7:25, 27) must be avoided, for they lead to death. Understanding will save us from the way of evil, from those who forsake the paths of righteousness to walk in the ways of darkness (2:12-13). The ways of wisdom are pleasant. Wisdom is a tree of life for those who cling to it (3:17-18).

In the New Testament, Christian teaching is sometimes called "the way" (Acts 9:2; 18:25-6; 22:4; 24:14). And Jesus spoke of Himself as the Way, the Truth (i.e. the fulfillment of promises), and the Life.

It is Jesus Christ, the eternal Wisdom of God, who speaks to us in the book of Proverbs. He was with God "in the beginning." When we read this statement in John 1, we must think of what Proverbs says about the Wisdom: "Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth" (8:23).

Redeemed life. Through Proverbs, too, Jesus Christ leads His chosen ones in the way of life. Wisdom holds its own feast (9:1ff), where we see what it has to offer. Therefore we must choose with the heart:

Keep your heart with all vigilance;
for from it flow the springs of life (4:23).

This text is quoted often, which is a reason for caution in [73] interpreting it. It does not mean that life or existence— whether in the good or the bad sense—is determined by the heart. The word *life* is not to be understood here in the neutral sense of mere existence but in the fuller sense of *redeemed* life.

The heart that lets itself be led by wisdom is like a fountain or spring of paradisaic life. Remember what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14).

3. Daily Life and the Ten Words of the Covenant

All of life in review. The revelation of the Lord does not fall into our laps out of a clear blue sky; it is not so "heavenly" that it has no relation whatsoever to ordinary human existence. We were not given the Bible so that we could lock up God's commands in our hearts without ever working them out and applying them to the complications of day-to-day living.

Scripture rejects the idea that the righteous live a "sacred" life as well as a "profane" life, arranging things in the profane sphere as they please, while always being careful to leave a bit of room for "religion" as a separate department. No, the Lord makes claims on all of human existence, including trade and industry, family and marriage, rulers and subjects. In the book of Proverbs, all of human life with its endless complications passes in review. In lively succession, a bewildering variety of practical topics is taken up. Striking comparisons and metaphors are thrown in, drawn from the life of nature as well as the human social world.

[74] If the book of Psalms makes us think of Handel or Bach, the book of Proverbs reminds us of the paintings of Pieter Brueghel and Jan Steen and the poetry of Jacob

roof above the entrance, which was supported by pillars, bore fragments of the following texts: (1) Proverbs 9:1, in French, (2) Proverbs 5:1, in Hebrew, (3) Proverbs 1:7, also in Hebrew, (4) I Corinthians 1:30, in Greek, and (5) James 3:17, in German. It is significant that these texts—of all texts—were chosen to embellish the entrance to an educational institution that had such influence on the Reformation in Europe. This indicates that Calvin, whose age set very high intellectual standards, knew how to distinguish between two kinds of "wisdom." Humanism allowed reason a higher standing than Scripture, but the Reformation insisted that the wisdom of Scripture must take precedence over rational thought.

Cats. For us, as twentieth century inhabitants of the Western world, Proverbs is an overwhelming flood of sayings in which the topic changes constantly. Therefore we would do well to take the introduction to Proverbs seriously.

Threatened by dangers. The teacher of wisdom seeks to give leadership to his disciples, who are threatened by the dangers of wealth, wasteful and elaborate feasts, courtesans, and other temptations of court life, which are increasing. He seeks to train them in the fear of the Lord and bind them to the path of the righteous. How else could he accomplish this than by reminding them of the words of the covenant, that is, by explaining the ten commandments God gave Israel?

The meaning of the various proverbs as well as the overall intent of the book will become clear if you bear this in mind. What this book gives us is not general wisdom about life. Instead, daily life is confronted with the Word of God. The Ten Words are upheld and applied on the level of "ordinary" human existence. Only when we grasp this point are we in a position to enjoy Proverbs properly.

Elements of humor. Think of the outstanding sketches of human vices in 25:24, 24:30ff, and 23:29ff. Could the point be made any clearer? We see the quarrelsome woman in her "expensive" home, the sluggard taking his afternoon nap and being overtaken by poverty, and the man enslaved by wine. Instead of immediately trying to deduce something from these texts, we should allow plenty of time to let the impressions sink in. Many of the proverbs are paintings in themselves, and many contain elements of humor. In some we see the tables turned unexpectedly. All that we read in Proverbs speaks to us directly:

[75] Like cold water to a thirsty soul,
so is good news from a far country.
Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain
is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked.
It is not good to eat much honey,
so be sparing of complimentary words.
A man without self-control
is like a city broken into and left without walls.
Like snow in summer or rain in harvest,
so honor is not fitting for a fool.
Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying,
a curse that is causeless does not alight.
A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass,
and a rod for the back of fools (25:25—26:3).

Could anyone possibly say it in a more pithy way?

Taking up various examples, we will now see how Proverbs gives us an illuminating commentary on what is involved in God's commandments. You would do well to read through the entire book of Proverbs once from this point of view, putting numbers in the margin to indicate which commandment the various proverbs deal with.

4. The Fifth Commandment

Discipline your son, and he will give you rest;
he will give delight to your heart (29:17).

The rod and reproof give wisdom,
but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother (29:15).

If one curses his father or his mother,
his lamp will be put out in utter darkness (20:20).

[76] My son, fear the LORD and the king (see I Pet. 2:17),
and do not disobey either of them;
for disaster from them will rise suddenly,

and who knows the ruin that will come from them both? (24:21-2).

Because proverbs were used so extensively in the training of government and court officials, we also read such admonitions as:

Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence
or stand in the place of the great
(see Matt. 20:20ff; Luke 22:24ff);

for it is better to be told, "Come up here,"
than to be put lower in the presence of the prince
(25:6-7; see also Luke 14:7ff).

5. The Sixth Commandment

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat;
and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;
for you will heap coals of fire on his head,
and the LORD will reward you (25:21-2).

This text requires some commentary. First of all, it shows us that the New Testament is not alone in recommending mercy; in fact, it only echoes what is already to be found in the Old Testament. Consider the commandment recorded in Exodus 23:4-5, and don't forget how Elisha ordered that a group of captured Syrian soldiers be given a meal and not be slain (II Kings 6:22-3). In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ taught that we must love our enemies (Matt. 5:44); Paul also quoted the text from Proverbs that we are considering (Rom. 12:20).

[77] The idea of heaping coals of fire on someone's head has become a general proverb outside the Biblical context.⁸ Just what this expression means, of course, is not easy to determine. Perhaps this proverb is referring to the agonies of conscience: the enemy whose evil acts are repaid with good suffers the tortures of self-reproach.

If you faint in the day of adversity,
your strength is small.
Rescue those who are being taken away to death;
hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter.
If you say, "Behold, we did not know this,"
does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?
Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it,
and will he not requite man according to his work? (24:10-12).

6. The Seventh Commandment

Sex life. Proverbs sings the praises of the virtuous housewife (31:10-31). A woman who fears the Lord is to be valued highly. Charm is deceptive, and beauty is vain.

This is not to say that the book of Proverbs attaches no [78] significance or value to sex life. On the contrary, we read:

Find joy with the wife you married in your youth,
fair as a hind, graceful as a fawn.
Let hers be the company you keep,
hers the breasts that ever fill you with delight,
hers the love that ever holds you captive (5:18-19 JB).

⁸ There are more examples of proverbs that have taken on a life of their own in our culture. "A hoary head is a crown of glory" (16:31). Man proposes, but God disposes (see 16:33). He who digs a pit for someone else Will fall into it himself (see 26:27). "Go to the ant, thou sluggard" (6:6 KJV). To give to the poor is to lend to the Lord (see 19:17). "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (16:18; see also 18:12). Humility goes before honor (see 18:12). Repay evil with good (see 17:13). We also find well-known proverbs in 11:22; 14:10, 34; 18:19, 24; 20:14; 22:6; 27:7, 17.

This is clear language. Proverbs also emphasizes that the wife must love her husband. Thus "natural" life is not cast aside. Isn't the Lord the Creator of nature *and* the human body?

In this age, in which all our certainties are being shaken, we would do well to keep the Bible's appreciation of life's value in mind. There's nothing wrong with enjoying life; in fact, man is told to enjoy life with the wife he loves (Eccl. 9:9).

Sex and service. An appreciation of life's value must be based on the realization that there is a certain order in living. This also comes out in Proverbs (see ch. 5 and 6:20—7:27). Sex and the service of the Lord belong together. Therefore a man must choose the right woman to be his wife. Not just any woman—even if she belongs to the covenant people—is suitable.

Now, there's nothing wrong with a woman being good-looking, charming and attractive. "A gracious woman gets honor," we read (11:16). Yet, a woman's attractiveness and charm should be a sign of noble character.

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout
is a beautiful woman without good sense (11:22 NEB).

The important thing, then, is to choose the right woman.

[79] He who finds a wife finds a good thing,
and obtains favor from the LORD (18:22).
House and wealth are inherited from fathers,
but a prudent wife is from the LORD (19:14).

7. The Ninth Commandment

Sins of the tongue. This commandment covers sins of the tongue, including such offenses as arguing, slander and quarreling. What a wealth of wise words we find in the book of Proverbs!

Today, just as in Old Testament times, people's feelings are quickly stirred up. We still don't seem to know when to speak and when to remain silent. This leads to all sorts of problems and unfortunate situations. We could save ourselves so much grief by restraining ourselves!

There are people who feel they must fight everything out and "stand up for their rights." If only they would read Proverbs and listen to its sound advice! In Proverbs patience and tolerance are praised:

Experience uses few words;
discernment keeps a cool head.
Even a fool, if he holds his peace, is thought wise;
keep your mouth shut and show your good sense (17:27-8 NEB).

Better be slow to anger than a fighter,
better govern one's temper than capture a city (16:32 NEB).

We should stay away from quarrels; in fact, we should fear them.

[80] He who forgives an offense seeks love,
but he who repeats a matter alienates a friend (17:9).

Hatred stirs up strife,
but love covers all offenses (10:12; see also I Cor. 13:5).

The beginning of strife is like letting out water;
so quit before the quarrel breaks out (17:14).

He who meddles in a quarrel not his own
is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears (26:17).

For lack of wood the fire goes out;
and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.
As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire,
so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife (26:20-1).

If only we would constantly keep these wise sayings in mind! Then there would be much less arguing and quarreling—in the church and elsewhere. In I Corinthians 13, Paul sings a similar song: "Love is patient and kind. It does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things" (vs. 4, 6-7; see also Prov. 11:13).

Neither slander nor flattery. Naturally, there are times when one cannot remain silent.

He who rebukes a man will afterward find more favor
than he who flatters with his tongue (28:23).

Better is open rebuke.
than hidden love.
Faithful words are the wounds of a friend;
profuse are the kisses of an enemy (27:5-6).

We must be upright in our relations with one another ^[81] (see 26:22ff). There must be no slander, but no flattery either. Time and again the false witness is raked over the coals (12:7, 19, 22; 14:5, 25; 19:5, 9). Judges must not accept bribes (21:14; 18:16).

We must be trustworthy, which means that we must protect the life and honor of others. Being trustworthy sometimes means remaining silent for the sake of our neighbor, for the gossip gives away secrets (11:13). Being trustworthy means speaking uprightly whenever we speak.

He who walks in integrity will be delivered,
but he who is perverse in his ways will fall into a pit (28:18).

8. Numerical Proverbs

A literary device. No doubt you have noticed that Proverbs was written in the same literary form as many of the Psalms. The book of Proverbs is made up of couplets in which the second line repeats the thought of the first, or supplements it, or says something that contrasts with it.

The *numerical proverbs*, which we find in 6:16-19 and also in chapter 30, represent a special style within the book. Certain things that have caught the attention of the teacher of wisdom are mentioned, introduced by a number that is often replaced in the following line by the next highest number. This literary device makes the reader more attentive.

There are six things which the LORD hates,
seven which are an abomination to him:
haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
and hands that shed innocent blood,
^[82] a heart that devises wicked plans,
feet that make haste to run to evil,
a false witness who breathes out lies,
and a man who sows discord among brothers (6:16-19).

What a wealth of revelation Scripture contains! How sharply it criticizes human society, which is often laced with evil poisons!

Scriptural insight. The Bible abounds in literary forms and styles. It never ceases to surprise us. Consider this classic passage:

Four things on earth are small,
but they are exceedingly wise:
the ants are a people not strong,

yet they provide their food in the summer;
the badgers are a people not mighty,
yet they make their homes in the rocks;
the locusts have no king,
yet all of them march in rank;
the lizard ⁹ you can take in your hands,
yet it is in kings' palaces (30:24-8).

What is a Christian who lives by the spirit of the Reformation supposed to do with such texts if his interest in them goes beyond the beauty of the language? A little sobriety can be helpful in interpretation. We have all heard it said that those who are not strong must rely on cunning. Now then, what Proverbs offers us is not the shrewd slyness of the deceiver but genuine wisdom, that is, Scriptural insight into life; it shows us how to make use of the possibilities provided by the Lord. That's what the small ^[83] animals and insects do, and Agur ¹⁰ advises us to do so as well.

Wise unto salvation. The Pentecost church, which is weak, can become powerful. It cannot boast of an impressive organization, but it fills the earth all the same. We are called not to hover above the clouds but to take up our position in the midst of life and grab hold of the opportunities God gives us. That's the meaning of wisdom.

The wonderful book of Proverbs is intended to lead us to practical wisdom for daily life. Keep on reading this book, for it will make you wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Proverbs, too, is "inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (II Tim. 3:16).

9. Equipped for Every Good Work

The fruit of long observation. The book of Proverbs teaches us how to live our lives as wise human beings and not as fools. As we saw earlier, it does this in its own way.

While the prophet always speaks out of a particular situation, in Proverbs we see the teacher of wisdom breaking through to a universal formulation of the truth he expresses. The prophet intervenes in a particular state of affairs, but the wise man formulates rules for human life that remain valid at all times. The advice given in Proverbs on finding our way through life's tangles is the fruit of long ^[84] observation. The covenant people—especially the youth—are taught righteousness.

Faithfulness to the covenant. Although worship is virtually never discussed,¹¹ we should bear in mind that the proverbs making up this remarkable book were intended for the *people of Israel*, the people of the pilgrimages to the temple and the sacrifices in the sanctuary. It is in *Jerusalem*, in the *temple*, that the church is instructed in true wisdom. Therefore we may not separate the teachings of the law (the torah) from the book of Proverbs. The knowledge of human misery imparted in its commentary on the ten commandments drove people to seek atonement and reconciliation with God in the sanctuary.

However much the teacher of wisdom may have differed from the prophet in his manner and method of instruction, he knew of no other "way" than that preached by the prophet—the way of life! The proverbs, like the words of the prophets, call for righteousness and faithfulness to the covenant.

⁹ The lizard referred to here is the gecko, which walks on walls and ceilings, making use of suction pads on its feet.

¹⁰ We know nothing about Agur. Was he perhaps an Edomite?

¹¹ The "priestly" element is not entirely absent in the book of Proverbs. We read an exhortation to bring the first fruits to the Lord (3:9-10), a warning against bringing offerings out of habit without repentance (14:9; 15:8; 21:3, 27), a warning against bringing offerings with the wrong intention in mind (21:27), and a warning against rash vows (20:25).

The way of salvation. Next to the prophet and the priest, the teacher of wisdom had a place of his own within the covenant community: his task was to equip the young people for "every good work." Man, as the prisoner of his own deeds, was to be confronted with God's judgment—but also with his own responsibility.

The young people were not told fairy tales or edifying fables. No, they were shown life as it actually is, for soon ^[85] they would have to find their own way through life's tangles.

"Wisdom cries aloud in the street" (1:20). What is its message? "My son, if you receive my words . . . then you will understand righteousness and justice" (2:1, 9).

Proverbs does not give us lessons in ethics or morality. Wisdom teaches us what life is; it teaches us the way of salvation. Wisdom was passed on by Israel's Redeemer to make it easier for us.

"And now, my sons, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways" (8:32). Isn't the entire Pentecost church composed of nobles at the King's court who are called on to keep watch at the gate of Wisdom's palace?

[86] Ecclesiastes

1. Background and Authorship

A province of a foreign empire. The "preacher" who speaks to us in Ecclesiastes is often identified as Solomon. Before we accept this conclusion about the book's origin, we should note that this preacher refers to "all who were over Jerusalem before me" (1:16). If Solomon were indeed the Preacher, he could point to only one predecessor of his own house, i.e. David. (It's not likely that he would have referred to the Jebusite kings who ruled Jerusalem before David captured it.)

The name *Solomon* does not appear in Ecclesiastes, and the Preacher's description of his era makes us think of a much later time. In 5:8 we read about the oppression of the poor and the suppression of the people's rights *in the province*. "The high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them." This makes us think of the time in history when Jerusalem was a province belonging to a foreign power, e.g. Persia. The Preacher would then be a son of David's house who ruled Jerusalem as governor in the name of the foreign empire.

[87] Such a situation is certainly conceivable, for Zerubbabel, who was of David's house, did in fact occupy such a position after the return from exile. Hence it is not necessary to assume that an aged, cynical Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes after he had grown weary of life. Instead we should accept this book with its contents just as it stands.

National depression. The Preacher's time was an era of national depression. Occupation by foreigners (Persians or Greeks or Syrians) had led the intelligentsia and the younger generation to doubt Israel's Messianic calling. What were the Jews to think of God's control of human history if His promises about "the age" were not fulfilled and it began to look as though the Messiah would never come? How were the Jews to conduct themselves in the face of tyrannical injustice? How were they to act toward the occupying forces on a day-to-day basis? Should they be subservient, or should they let their feelings show? Could they go along with revolutionary movements? Were they to avenge all injustice?

Since no Messianic era seemed to be dawning, since the very meaning of existence was being cast into doubt, since experience showed that it is wiser to compromise and cast in one's lot with the rising forces of a powerful new empire, the Jews could not help asking themselves whether it still made sense to serve God. What was the right way to live in such a situation? Was it a matter of eating and drinking for tomorrow we die? Were the righteous to quietly waste away because of the social and ethical distress of their nation? Or was there a better way?

The clash of ideas. It has sometimes been argued that the book of Ecclesiastes is the outcome of a dialogue, a conference, a forum. Its text would then be the report of a study committee or a commission of inquiry. Now, there is no good reason for us to doubt that Ecclesiastes is the [88] work of a single author. This book is not a report issued by a religious discussion group but the Word of God coming to us by way of a retired governor in Jerusalem, a scholar and teacher of wisdom who digs into the problems of his time.

The teacher sighs as he contemplates the thought that human life is a never-ending cycle and considers all that is warped and aged and defective. Some 300 years before the birth of the One who seated Himself on David's throne, a son of David of the line of Nathan (a son of Bathsheba) speaks up. His royal testament, in which the Spirit of Christ speaks to us, helps us along in our struggles in this possessed world.

As we read some of the "strange" statements in Ecclesiastes, we must bear in mind that there are no quotation marks in the Bible as it comes to us in the original languages. As a Biblical author weighed ideas suggested to him by others and incorporated them into his own train of thought, he would put them down on paper without setting them off

from his own convictions by quotation marks. Although Ecclesiastes was written by a single author, we must not forget that it includes the clash of ideas.

2. Is Life Meaningless?

Fear of the future. Our age has an intense interest in the meaning and purpose of life. Fear of the future is a dominant motif in our time. The inadequacy of human goodwill has been thoroughly demonstrated by the two world wars.

Although many thinkers and poets have pondered the meaning of human existence, the results they have come up ^[89] with are meager indeed. They maintain that our life is irrevocably limited by death, and that all existence is essentially tragic, leading only to misfortune and failure. All there remains for man is to heroically accept this night without the prospect of a new dawn.

Man is thrown into a life that leads only to death. Only by looking into the abyss can he be heroic. This conception of human existence can express itself in terms of resignation. Yet, such an awareness of life's uselessness can also elevate man and even throttle his *Angst* about life.

An awareness of man's fall. In literary and philosophical treatments of this theme, we sense some awareness of man's fall. But that's as far as it goes: we read nothing about the Redeemer. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway tells us about a huge fish caught by an old man after a long, long struggle: most of the fish is devoured by greedy sharks before he can even get it to shore. While it is only a story, it does express a complaint about life.

In *The Pearl*, Steinbeck tells of how an Indian finds a pearl that leads to great misfortune. Behind this story is an outlook on life, a "prophecy," if you will. Man may think he has found a pearl of great value, but in the end he is disappointed and his effort is wasted. The Indian, who promises his newly born child a great future on the basis of the pearl, has to flee when robbers try to steal it. Finally the child dies after being hit by a wild gunshot from one of the robbers. Is there anything left to man but his fallenness?

Even if that's what things add up to, there are many who are not satisfied with an attitude of passivity. Their heroic response to this cursed existence is a frantic freedom in which they skim the cream off the top of life, losing themselves in its many and varied postures. Fallen man is a law unto himself: he makes the best of this life, for it could ^[90] have been a lot worse. The disappointment, anxiety, *lausea*, and flight from reality often result in a decision to throw oneself away by giving one's desires and passions free reign.

A philosophy of despair. What about Ecclesiastes? Doesn't this book have a great deal in common with today's philosophy of despair? Doesn't the Preacher join Heidegger in declaring that human life is "Being-towards-death" (*Sein zum Tode*)! Doesn't he join Jaspers in recognizing that our being-in-the-world will necessarily lead to shipwreck?

The Preacher begins by complaining about the fruitlessness, the vanity, of all existence. Isn't *Abel* the first human being to die, a figure we could use to typify the human race in general? The name *Abel* (Hebrew: *Habel*) means *a breath, vapor, vanity*. We hear this name echoed when the Preacher says "Habel habalim" (Vanity of vanities). Everything is vanity (*habel*). "What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" asks the Preacher (1:3). Aren't we dangerously close here to the nausea described by Sartre?

3. Back to Genesis 1-4

A message to proclaim. At first glance the book of Ecclesiastes does not seem to belong in the Bible. Isn't the wisdom it gives us the same as the wisdom "the world" offers? Is "the Preacher" really preaching the gospel? Do we hear God's Word in Ecclesiastes, or is it the voice of experience speaking? Does the Preacher exhibit the genuine piety and trust in the Lord that we find throughout the Psalms, for example? Is his book, which

paints such a dark ^[91] picture of man and gives voice to such unsparing criticism of human life, truly edifying? Does it build us up in our faith?

When we take a closer look at this strange book, we find that it does indeed preach to us. The message it proclaims is what the Heidelberg Catechism calls our *misery*. The Preacher is not just describing what *experience* has shown him about the vanity and corruption and uselessness of existence. No, he looks at reality in the light of *revelation*.

The Preacher is well acquainted with Genesis 1-4, that is, with the *creation* of the world by God and man's freely chosen *fall into sin*. "Behold, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices" (7:29). The Preacher also declares: "He has made everything beautiful in its time" (3:11). In these words we hear something of God's jubilation in Paradise: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."

Judgment and promises. Man spoiled everything, and now his life is subject to the curse of Paradise. He is dust, and he will return to dust. In the sweat of his brow he will eat his bread. His cursed existence involves endless labor and drudgery. All this is echoed in Ecclesiastes:

Naked from his mother's womb he came, as naked as he came he will depart again; nothing to take with him after all his efforts. This is a grievous wrong, that as he came, so must he go; what profit can he show after toiling to earn the wind, as he spends the rest of his days in darkness, grief, worry, sickness, and resentment? (5:14-16 JB).

But Ecclesiastes does not talk only about man's misery; the Preacher also mentions the last judgment (11:9; 12:14; 8:8; see also Rom. 2:16; I Cor. 4:5; II Cor. 5:10). ^[92]Furthermore, he knows of the promises made to the righteous. Man cannot fathom and understand everything; he lacks the "wisdom" for that. All the same, he can *accept life*— as long as he remembers his Creator.

Despite all the misery under the sun, he can say: "Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun" (11:7). His advice is: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might" (9:10 NIV). Thus the Preacher speaks to us in positive terms about serving God, which is *not* meaningless.

Something new under the sun. In the light of the New Testament, the meaning of his message becomes clearer, for in Christ there *is* something new under the sun. The oppressive cycle has been broken. When we sigh, we can do so in hope, for the struggles and labor of the church are not in vain: they are the work of the Lord (I Cor. 15:58).

We must open our ears to the sighing of the entire creation, which is subject to the Preacher's verdict of vanity. Those sounds are labor pains indicating that birth is imminent—and not the moaning of death. "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:19). Even if experience continues to say, "Vanity of vanities!", in *faith* we cling to a hope that will not be put to shame.

4. The Perspective of Faith

A tiresome cycle. The theme of Ecclesiastes is announced in 1:2 and repeated in the last chapter (12:8). Throughout much of the rest of the book, this theme is worked out.

If man were to depend on experience alone, he would have to admit that life is a tiresome, never-ending cycle.

^[93] There is nothing new under the sun. All the streams flow out to the sea, but the sea never fills up. How could there possibly be anything new? What must we do to find happiness? Should we follow the way of wisdom? (1:12-18). Or should we lose ourselves in the various pleasures available to man? (2:1-11).

We must not pursue pleasure, for that turns out to be vanity and a striving after wind. Wise men and fools suffer the same fate. It's enough to make one collapse in despair.

God's gifts. The Preacher doesn't actually go that far, for he points out that it is *God* who has ordered all things. It is not in man's power to simply eat, drink and enjoy himself in the midst of his toil and misery, for everything comes to us from the hand of God (2:24-6; 3:11 ff).

Life comes to us as a gift from God. It is God who determines the time and the hour for everything. God brings back what is past and creates the oppressive cycle of birth, growth, decline, and death. Why? In order to make man fear Him! (3:14).

Man must understand his own nothingness and misery, his dependence on the sovereign God. The longing for the coming Messianic "era" is laid in his heart (3:11). Man is driven to try to find everything out, but he cannot. All there is left for him to do is to confess God's sovereign power and his own calling to fear the Lord.

Sifting humanity. The Preacher's inquiring eye goes still further. Is there Messianic light breaking through anywhere? Do we see a new world order emerging? Alas, just where the judgment seat of David's house once stood, injustice reigns. It is true that God will judge, but the final judgment is still far away. God is sifting humanity. The lot of all men is the same: they die like animals and return to dust. When a man dies, we do not see his spirit ascending to God, who gave it. There is no comfort to be drawn from [94] experience, then. Day by day man must live in sheer dependence and gratitude (3:16-22).

All around us we see injustice and greed (4:1-12); we see how fragile popularity is (vs. 13-16). Things don't look much more promising when we turn to "spiritual life." Just look around in the *temple*. People weary themselves and the Lord with their foolish offerings; they try to hitch God to their own wagons by promises that often turn out to be empty words. God certainly takes no pleasure in a vain stream of words: obedience is always better than sacrifice. A torrent of words is not a foundation on which to build one's life (5:1-6).

What about wealth? Anyone who does not realize that life is a gift of God is a pauper (5:19-20). This we must bear in mind as we contemplate the figure of the rich fool. Doesn't Psalm 49 tell us that no man can ransom himself? Who can judge anyone stronger than himself? (6:10). We can't help thinking of the book of Job as we read this. What is man, with all his strength and wealth, able to achieve over against God?

*Fear God, honor the king
(1 Pet. 2:17 NIV).*

5. Obedience and Government

A series of proverbs. From chapter 7 of Ecclesiastes on, it's harder to see just what the Preacher is getting at: we seem to be faced with a long series of more or less independent proverbs. Yet, if we bear in mind that the Preacher is speaking out of the political, social and cultural situation of his time we will catch sight of the line of thought connecting all the proverbs.

[95] Profiteers and collaborators are interested in immediate, short-term gains. Yet, even the life of a puffed-up opportunist and upstart has its sure limit—death. Judgment will come afterward. Therefore we should be patient and not complain about how bad our times are in comparison with the good old days (7:8-10).

Reminders of Christ. In the context of these proverbs, we hear a warning against excessive righteousness (vs. 16). It is for God to judge; man, in his righteous zeal, must not make the mistake of thinking that he can ensure that the judgment is favorable. But this warning is no excuse for an opportunistic attitude either: man is also warned against excessive wickedness (vs. 17). Even if lawlessness makes the love of many grow cold, man must cling to the unshaken norms. He must obey the tyrant, the ruler, the king.

In Ecclesiastes we are repeatedly reminded of the words of Christ, for instance, in the comments on the rich man and the call for patience. We have another such reminder when the Preacher seems to say: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." The Preacher offers an argument in favor of this advice: we are to obey the king's commands because of our "sacred oath" (8:2), which we have sworn before God. True wisdom, then, is *not* revolutionary. The non-Israelite ruler also rules by the grace of God.

God's unfathomable ways. The people of the ancient Near East loved repetition and used it to reach a certain climax in their train of thought. Ecclesiastes gives us an example of this. Various themes pass in review. It is emphasized that God's control of events in this world is unfathomable. Because judgment seems to be delayed so long, many seize the opportunity to do as they please. But the Preacher knows better than that: those who fear God ^[96] will prosper, but it will not go well with the wicked (8:12-13).

There is an equalization of sorts that takes place before our very eyes, for one fate awaits all—the righteous and the wicked, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who don't (9:1ff)—Wisdom is despised. The story of the poor wise man who saved the city only to be forgotten later illustrates this. A little folly is stronger than wisdom. That's simply how things go in the world (9:13—10:3). Just look behind the scenes: study politics and watch governments in operation. People are passed over constantly and ignored, as snobbishness wins out. The walls have ears. Even a poor government must be respected (10:4ff).

6. All Things Made New

One day at a time. What, then, is the duty of man? Is he to be outraged at injustice? Must he seek to fathom God's work? Not at all. Man must face life one day at a time. Each new day brings enough problems and difficulties without us probing the cosmic depths of evil.

Yet we must not get stuck in a rut. We cannot get to the bottom of everything. In the final analysis, we must accept life, dealing firmly with its problems and challenges.

Don't argue needlessly! If you worry too much about the weather, you'll never get around to sowing—to say nothing of reaping. We should calmly enjoy God's gifts in marriage, in culture, in our work (9:7ff; 11:1ff).

The Preacher's message is that we must *accept life* in a world of pain and sorrow. This message focuses our attention on the two poles of human existence—our origin and our destiny, that is, where we have come from and where ^[97] we are going. Man must think of his Creator, the one who made him, without forgetting that his Creator is also his Judge. We must not be led astray by new philosophical ideas, for what it all boils down to is: "Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil" (12:13-14).

Let the young people, the hope of the church, live by this rule. Then the Preacher's words about the vanity of life will *benefit* them. They will realize that they must work while it is yet day. God's gift, the gift of life, must be understood as a task.

A beautiful allegory. The last chapter of Ecclesiastes contains a beautiful allegory in which the human body is compared to a run-down house. As we read it, we think of the words of Paul: "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (II Cor. 5:1).

In Christ, our life, our existence, our body is not in vain. Because of Christ, the refrain "Vanity of vanities!" is not the last word, for all things are *made new*.

As a royal testament, the book of Ecclesiastes asks us to accept life. It has become the testament of the Great King, Jesus Christ, the Son of David. Anxiety about life and contempt for the world have been overcome. Norms are not undermined and destroyed by doubts about the meaning of existence. Neither a wholly passive spirit nor lawless

passion can be tolerated. The youth who wants to recognize no constraints must let himself be led by the norms of God's salutary commandments.

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know ^[98] that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

Remove vexation from your mind, and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain; in the day when the keepers of the house tremble [hands], and the strong men are bent [legs], and the grinders cease because they are few [teeth], and those that look through the windows are dimmed [eyes], and the doors on the street are shut [ears]; when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low [voice] (11:9—12:4).

Building during the spring. The book of Ecclesiastes gives us an answer to the weary questions of our time. Youth is called to build during the spring, in the light of the coming day of the world's Creator, Judge and Redeemer.

God's Word requires us to be open to guidance from heaven (Phil. 3:20), but it does not suggest that we are only to *nibble* at the good gifts God has given. In a refrain that recurs seven times (2:24-6; 3:12-15; 3:22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:7ff), the Preacher tells us to rejoice, to enjoy life with the wife we love, to indulge ourselves in the good things of life.

He does not advise us to lead a happy-go-lucky, carefree life, for we are to remember our Creator and Judge. Neither does he preach a weary acquiescence or an avoidance of the world or a way of life that involves as little as possible of what the world contains.

We, as twentieth century Christians, must pass this ^[99] message on to the hippies, the uncommitted, and those who live in despair. E. T. van den Born writes:

If we, as Christ's church, actually give up this world and concentrate all our hopes on going to heaven after we die and also take the other articles of our universal and undoubted Christian faith with us on our "pilgrim's journey" only for old times' sake, then Ecclesiastes will surely remain the least read Bible book for us. Its problems, its struggles, its tears will no longer move us. After all, aren't we on our way to Jesus? But when we bear in mind that our deliverance has already begun—Golgotha, Christ's resurrection, His ascension into heaven, Pentecost—and that Christ must triumph in this world all down the line if we are to receive the crown of life, we finally begin to understand the Preacher with his sorrows and joys. What moved him is ultimately what moves us as well, namely, the restoration of all things in Christ Jesus. ¹²

¹² *De Wijsheid van den Prediker* (Kampen, 1939), p. 140.

[100] Song of Songs

1. Sex and Grace

A pure part of the creation. In some English Bibles, Ecclesiastes is followed by the "Song of Solomon" (e.g. the King James Bible and the Revised Standard Version). More recent translations call it the "Song of Songs," which corresponds to the Hebrew title. It is the most beautiful, the most sublime song, and therefore Luther called it the "Hohe Lied." Dutch translations have followed his lead by calling it the "Hooglied." In French Bibles it is called the "Cantique des Cantiques."

This song deals with the most beautiful thing in God's creation, namely, the love-union of two people committed to each other in marriage. Paul reminds us: "Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer" (I Tim. 4:4-5).

Sin has left its destructive traces here; in fact, sex threatens to become a primary source of unfaithfulness. Yet this is no reason to cut sex out of our lives. We must not desert, as the disciples once wanted to do ^[101] (Matt. 19:10). All we need to cut out of our lives is sin, which is always seeking to trap us. Within the circle of the covenant, the Lord makes our love life, which is a pure part of the original creation, flourish in His merciful love and grace.

Greek ideas. The Greeks, who succeeded in drilling their philosophy into their cultural successors in the Western world, regarded the body as the source of evil and misery. To them the soul was a beautiful bird in an ugly cage. Their ideas seeped into the Christian world. Think of the monastic movement and the emphasis on asceticism already present in the early Christian church.

Even the famous Augustine, after his conversion in Milan, chose to follow the lead of Antony, the Egyptian monk, and lead a life of sexual abstinence. In his *Confessions* he writes: "You converted me to yourself, so that I no longer desired a wife or placed any hope in this world but stood firmly upon the rule of faith, where you had shown me to her [i.e. his mother] in a dream so many years before. And you turned her sadness into rejoicing, into joy far fuller than her dearest wish, far sweeter and more chaste than any she had hoped to find in children begotten of my flesh." ¹³

Dualistic theories that crept into the church have given rise to the idea that sex life is somehow lower in value—if not sinful in itself. If we allow ourselves to be governed by such theories as we approach the Song of Songs, we will find that we don't quite know what to do with it. We will then be forced to treat it as an allegory, an extensive metaphor about the relationship between Christ and His church.

^[102] *Marriage as a reflection.* There's nothing wrong with drawing a parallel between marriage and Christ's relationship to the church He bought with His blood. Scripture itself does so, speaking of Christ as the Bridegroom and of the church as the bride (Rev. 19:7; 22:17). Commenting on the famous text "The two shall become one flesh," Paul declares: "This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:31-2).

In order to bring into focus the different perspectives on the Song of Songs, we must recognize that insofar as this book speaks of marriage itself, it invites us to look at marriage as a reflection of the relationship between the King of the church and His bride. Just as an intense, pure love, a strong yearning, ties the two major characters in the Song of Songs together, so there is a mutual attraction between Christ and His church.

Yet this insight does *not* give us the right to spiritualize everything in the Song of Songs. We may not interpret it in a way that suggests that it really has nothing to do with

¹³ VIII-12, R. S. Pine-Coffin translation, published by Penguin Books, pp. 178-9 (italics omitted).

natural human love but is purely "spiritual" in intent.

Love, which it reveals to us as something sweet, wonderful and powerful, is not a mere image or an unreal reflection. No, it is a gift, a reality, and it is described for us as a fruit of God's grace. The natural passion we encounter in the Song of Songs is not intended to provide us with sounds and colors for constructing an allegory dealing with "grace." No, this book describes "nature" as *redeemed* by grace; it describes love life as *saved* by Christ.

2. A Celebration of Love

A locked garden. Is it because of the old distinction between "nature" and "grace" (which we claim to reject) ^[103] that the open, straightforward language of the Song of Songs seems so strange to us? To those who are truly pure, there is nothing impure about this love song in which the bride and the bridegroom speak of each other's physical assets in an appealing way and express their yearning for each other. All the same, their thoughts are phrased in language and images that may strike us as somewhat roguish and risqué. The bride is spoken of as a garden, an orchard. Now then, the owner will have to come and enjoy the fruits (4:12-5:1).

The glory of the ancient Near East is concentrated in the appealing figure of the bride, who is not a shy, easily embarrassed young woman who withdraws suddenly. To the young men she is a locked garden, a covered well, but to one man, her beloved, she opens herself; she responds to his amorous words (7:8-9). In short, she surrenders and gives herself to him. She is not an unapproachable, frigid bride, nor does she hide the fact that she is madly in love with her beloved; she is "sick with love" (5:8). Openly she confesses: "I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me" (7:10).

Two dreams. How close to us this book comes! The young woman is sketched in truly human terms, with the result that we form a vivid picture of her in our minds. We know that when two people are in love, they often dream about each other. The Song of Songs tells us of two such dreams.

In the first dream (3:1ff), the bride seeks her beloved on her bed one night. Of course she does not find him. She goes outside and finally tracks him down in the city and brings him to her mother's house. Isn't that a typical lover's dream?

Her other dream (5:2ff) gives us a different picture. While "she" slept, "he" knocked at the door, but she did not feel like getting up to open it. Later she was sorry — ^[104] after he had already vanished. She looked for him in the city, with the result that the watchmen beat her and took away her mantle. Now, you don't need an extensive knowledge of psychology to realize that in this dream, the bride was admitting her own capriciousness and reproaching herself for it. Isn't that just the sort of thing that happens when you're in love?

Togetherness. When two people are in love, they want to experience and do everything together. The coming of spring, for example, is not something for them to enjoy separately:

Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for lo, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away (2:10-13).

Here the bride tells us what her beloved said. She, too, is eager to witness nature's growth and regenerative power. She wants to experience all this in the company of her lover:

Come, my beloved, let us go out into the fields
to lie among the henna-bushes;
let us go early to the vineyards
and see if the vine has budded or its blossom opened,
[105] if the pomegranates are in flower.
There will I give you my love (7:11-12 NEB).

What a child of nature!

Home and family. She shows us what kind of girl she is when she talks about her older brothers, who dealt with her somewhat harshly but were also protective toward her (1:6; 8:8-9). She is tightly bound to her mother as well: more than once we hear her speak of "my mother." She wants to take her beloved home to her mother's house (3:4; see also 8:1ff)- Moreover, it was under her mother's apple tree that the two lovers met for the first time (8:5).

Theirs is not a love that breaks with the home and the parents in a secretive way. On the contrary, it seeks to share in the cosiness of the parental home:

Ah, why are you not my brother,
nursed at my mother's breast!
Then if I met you out of doors, I could kiss you
without people thinking ill of me (8:1 JB).

3. More Than Solomon

The shepherd and the Shulammitte. How open this child is! How spontaneous and free she is in her relation to her beloved! But who is she? It appears that she is a girl from the country, a girl accustomed to hard work, her skin darkened by countless hours spent outdoors.

And who is he? He is presented to us as a shepherd (1:7; 2:16). Yet there are a number of expressions in the Song of Songs that might lead us to think that this rustic figure is actually *King Solomon* (1:4; 3:7ff; 6:8-9; 8:11-12). While [106] some scholars identify the shepherd with Solomon, others maintain that Solomon had taken the Shulammitte (i.e. the bride) into his harem, even though she remained devoted to her "first love" (i.e. the shepherd).

Two royal children. I believe that the Song of Songs need not be interpreted in a way that makes Solomon an actual character playing a role in the story. Solomon is mentioned, of course, but only by way of contrast. The poor shepherd feels happier with his country bride than Solomon ever was with all his wealth and wisdom. In this respect he has more than Solomon.

The authentic love of the young man and the young woman who sought and found each other freely stands far above life in the harem, with its distortion of what God has created, its hypocrisy, its slavish subordination. Solomon in all his glory was never arrayed like these two royal children who become one in soul and body in accordance with the creation order. This comes out beautifully in the passage about the vineyard:

Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon;
he let out the vineyard to keepers;
each one was to bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver.
My vineyard, my very own, is for myself;
you, O Solomon, may have the thousand,
and the keepers of the fruit two hundred (8:11-12).

Klaas Schilder comments:

Let wealthy Solomon keep what is his—his thousand pieces of silver, his accretion of capital, his royal domain. The bridegroom does not begrudge Solomon his possessions, just as the ordinary church member is not envious of those who hold a special office. The bridegroom has something that Solomon, a ruler living in ^[107] the public eye, does not have King Solomon cannot manage all his property personally; there are all sorts of strangers coming between him and his property, his vineyard, namely, his watchmen, guards, pruners, grape-treaders, and rakers. But there is no one to come between the bridegroom and the bride. *His* "vineyard" is for him alone to behold: there is no stranger involved in the affairs of this couple. Property and possession go together here, as do possession and management. Solomon has to give a good part of his vineyard's produce to people who work for him—at least one fifth of the thousand pieces of silver. But the bridegroom has complete possession of the bride. All that she is and produces is exclusively for him. She is indivisible, and so are her profits, for everything belongs to him. Yet he is of Christ, and Christ is God's.

A bold bride. The shepherd, then, certainly has more than Solomon. His love life rises far above the marriage practices at the royal courts in the ancient Near East, where a poor example was set for the people. This man is no tyrant, and his wife is no slave. In an idyllic setting we see two people giving themselves freely to one another.

Aren't you amazed at the bride's boldness and comradely manner toward her beloved, which is hardly what one would expect in the East? He takes her, but it is as though she takes him. Ruth could perhaps have talked her language.

There is something truly royal about their courtship, with no hint of destructive slavery in their love. Schilder observes:

Whenever a man who fears the Lord takes a wife and she takes him, they *are* king and queen, even if he doesn't *play* the role of king and she doesn't *play* the role of queen. It's not a matter of playing a *role* at all, for in Christ they *are* anointed king and queen. There has always been an *office* of *all* believers, even in the days of ^[108] the old covenant. Those who hold this office are at the same time *royal figures* Anyone who reads the Song of Songs in this light will find it a source of great joy. He will not have to "spiritualize" it, for it is already spiritual through and through; all of it is spiritual. Does this mean that it is not natural? Don't ask such a foolish question: the spiritual is to be sought *in the midst* of the natural. Nature is brought under the Spirit and sanctified to God by Him. ¹⁴

No subjection or exploitation. This small book of the Bible has always contained a rich message for us. It is fitting that it should follow Ecclesiastes, where we read an appeal to accept life. For the believers, the world is not a nest of vipers (*Noeud des Viperes*, Francois Mauriac) in the final analysis, and the life of the redeemed is not lived under the sign of daily misery (*Bonjour Tristesse*, Francoise Sagan). Christ has defeated the great viper and has thereby overcome our misery and sadness.

The love between a man and a woman must likewise be lifted up beyond all show and appearance, all subjection and exploitation. Messianic joy can stream forth from this often misunderstood Bible book. The game of love is being played in earnest here, for this mystery has to do with the relation between Christ and His bride, the church.

4. The Unity of the Book

Three refrains. As you read the Song of Songs, you will see that it is actually composed of a number of separate ^[109] songs. Yet we need not assume that this book is really an anthology. On three occasions a refrain is preceded by expressions of love on the part of the bridegroom (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). The refrains divide the Song of Songs into four sections:

¹⁴ "Meer dan Salomo is hier: Bij net Kerstfeest," in *De Reformatie*, XXII, Dec. 28, 1946. Also *Schriftoverdenkingen*, Vol. III (Goes, 1958), pp. 212, 210.

(1) 1:1—2:7, (2) 2:8—3:5, (3) 3:6—8:4—note the language used in 5:8—and (4) 8:5-14.

Various expressions used repeatedly strengthen the impression that this book forms a unity, a unity of successive love lyrics. The one antiphonal song succeeds the other.

The daughters of Jerusalem. The bridegroom and his bride are not the only ones engaged in the dialogue; there is also conversation between the bride and some women of the city referred to as "daughters of Jerusalem" (5:8—6:3). We need not take these "daughters of Zion" (3:11) to be women from the harem: they are asked to find the bride's beloved and give him a message, something they could hardly be expected to do if they lived in the isolation of the harem.

The daughters of Jerusalem are simply the women of the city, who, as it happens, were not unfavorably disposed toward the bridegroom (1:3). But the author of the song is quick to point out that "he" is not attracted by other women: "As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens" (2:2). Thus the daughters of Jerusalem do not appear in this song as *competitors*; they are a corps of interested and curious *observers*, as it were. By playing this role typical of women, they give even more life to this poetic song.

The garden and the city. The images in this song are drawn from both nature and culture. We read about doves, a flock of goats, a gazelle, the scent of Lebanon, beds of spices, and budding vines—nature. But we also read about Pharaoh's chariots, the curtains of Solomon, his palanquin, the tower of David, and alabaster columns ^[110] set upon bases of gold. Doesn't this remind you of the New Jerusalem, where there is no contrast between the garden and the city?

The modern city pollutes the environment and mutilates what is natural, including marriage. Culture fights continually against nature, and development against the "vineyard." Yet, in the Song of Songs culture provides images to describe nature and the natural. The city and garden are not at war but form a synthesis, as in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21-22), where a river lined with trees of life flows through the middle of the city—Paradise regained.

A holy yearning. The message of the Song of Songs is that life is redeemed by God's grace, with the result that "the beginning of eternal joy can already be tasted in sex life. In the Garden of Eden, the kingship of man was brought out with regard to marriage: "Be fruitful and multiply!" Man and woman were allowed to bear God's image.

The Song of Songs shows us that even in this fallen world, we can be God's image-bearers. We can yearn for each other in a holy way. Everything that disturbs life and makes it unreal will deliberately be stripped away (see the refrain in 2:7).

The Song of Songs elevates the bond with "my dove, my perfect one" far above the harem life of queens, wives, concubines, and mistresses. For others she was like a wall, and her breasts were like the towers of a fortress. But she gives herself completely to her beloved; she gives him shalom and fullness of life. God saw what He had made, and behold, this too was very good.

My beloved is mine and I am his,
he pastures his flock among the lilies.
Until the day breathes
^[111] and the shadows flee,
turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle,
or a young stag upon rugged mountains (2:16-17).

At the end of the book we hear this cry again in a deliberate repetition:

Make haste, my beloved,
and be like a gazelle or a young stag
upon the mountains of spices (8:14).

[112] Index

Ark of the covenant, 61
Ascension of Christ, 32,
61 Augustine, 101
Covenant between God and His people, 56, 58
Covenant wrath, 49-53
Creation of the world, 28-30, 32, 57-8, 91-2
Curse resting on creation, 91-2
Death, 65-6
Good Shepherd, 60
Government and revolution, 76, 94-6
Great King, 49-50, 59, 97
Hebrew language, 88
Immanuel promise, 60
Jerusalem and the temple, 60-1
King James Bible, 9-10, 40, 100
Marriage and divorce, 102
Mashal, 67
Money and property, 94
Nature/grace, 58, 73, 102-3
Numbers in the Bible, 81-2
Poetry, Hebrew, 10, 14-15, 40-3, 81-2, 95
Psalms outside the book of Psalms, 35
Redemption and atonement, 64-6, 99
Revised Standard Version, 9-10, 34-5, 40, 100
Righteousness, 12, 17-33, 44-6, 48-53, 71, 84-5, 95
Schilder, Klaas, 106-8
Servant of the Lord, 30
Sexuality, 77-8, 100 ff
Song of Moses (Deut. 32), 59
"Soul", 53-4
Tabernacle, 50
Ten commandments, 74-81
Torah, 34, 58, 84
Witnesses to the covenant, 57-8
Yahweh, 59