

THE WISDOM BOOKS

The wisdom books apply the lessons of the Bible to our daily lives. The basic message here is that a life lived in service to God is a life worth living.

We begin with Job who rises above the most unimaginable tragedies to proclaim his faith, startling testimony to the truth that no experience in life should lead us away from God.

The Psalms exhibit the full range of emotions we feel as we make the journey of faith. These beautiful hymns to God are probably the part of the wisdom books most familiar to us.

Proverbs offers countless practical insights into everyday living, advocating a life close to God as the ideal.

In the book of Ecclesiastes (another title is “Qoheleth”), King Solomon tells us of his pursuit of happiness in this world. At the end of it all, he discovers that the most meaningful thing in life is to enjoy all the gifts God presents to us with each passing day.

At first reading, the Song of Songs sounds like nothing more than love poetry between a man and a woman. But because it is included in the Bible, it also serves the noble cause of expressing the love between God and people.

Solomon addresses us again in the book of Wisdom. This time he urges us to join him in the pursuit of wisdom. He illustrates the many advantages a servant of God enjoys in life. He draws much of his inspiration from the Exodus out of Egypt.

Finally, Sirach (another title is “Ecclesiasticus”) offers us an insightful review of the history of God’s people concentrating on famous figures from the past who distinguished themselves as models of faith.

Saint Jerome believed the books of wisdom were the perfect place to start reading the Bible. He valued the practical guidelines for life included in these books. He believed the wisdom books offered readers a good foundation for the rest of the Bible, especially the Gospels. After reading this material, you can decide whether you agree with Saint Jerome.

JOB

Every one of us at some point in our lives feels like Job. Like Job we wonder, “Why did God let this happen to me?” If we have not asked that question yet, we probably will. And when that time comes, Job’s story will be of help. It will give us the strength to face our own stories.

Job is a very religious man, blessed with all the best the world has to offer. Then tragedy strikes. At first he is strong enough to accept it. But in time he convinces himself that God is playing a cruel game with his life. At that point, Job sets out on a long journey that leads him far away from God and then back again.

But let’s go back to the beginning. God is so convinced of Job’s unflinching devotion that God accepts a challenge to put it to the test. In spite of devastating losses, Job’s devotion remains unshaken and he even blesses God who gives and takes away. But a further test reveals a change in Job. He still speaks of devotion to God but he does not give a blessing. We wonder what might be going on deep inside of him.

At this point in the account, three devoted friends turn up to comfort Job. Shocked by the change in Job when he curses the day he was born, the three friends urge him to repent. They are convinced his great suffering is a sign of some moral failure on his part. Job, of course, cannot accept their advice because he knows he has done nothing to deserve such suffering.

As the dialogue between Job and his friends continues, their efforts to force him to admit some degree of guilt serve only to strengthen his resolve to prove his innocence before God. Eventually the dialogue breaks down as Job becomes more and more convinced that God is treating him unjustly.

Then another figure speaks up. His name is Elihu, a young man who remained silent all this time out of respect for the friends who are older than he is. Elihu says he has been listening very carefully to what Job says. He heard Job defend his innocence before God. But Elihu believes Job is pressing against the boundaries of propriety when he points to his innocence to make God look like the guilty party.

At the end of his remarks, Elihu directs Job’s attention up to the heavens. He seems to succeed in preparing Job to listen to God. And God does at last speak to Job pointing out to him all the wonders of creation and the weakness of demanding strict justice in the world.

In the end, Job returns to the position he held at the very beginning of the book. He no longer holds up his innocence as proof against God. Instead, Job accepts the truth that everything is a gift from God and should be received as a gift. As the book concludes, we see Job enjoying the gifts he has from God, especially the birth of three beautiful daughters.

The 42 chapters of Job:

- 1 — 2 The Lord gives and takes away
- 3 — 14 Job's dialogue with the three friends begins
- 15 — 21 The dialogue becomes more intense
- 22 — 28 The dialogue breaks down
- 29 — 31 Job's final challenge to God
- 32 — 37 Elihu disposes Job to listen to God
- 38 — 41 God enlightens Job
- 42 Job enjoys God's gifts to him

The Adversary

The Hebrew expression *ha-satan* means “the accuser.” In Job, this figure is a loyal member of the court of heaven. Like all God’s servants, the accuser is dedicated to promoting true worship of God. He seeks to probe Job’s innermost being in order to disclose the deepest motivations for his piety.

Leviathan

Leviathan represents all that is out of control. In the poetry of the ancient world, Leviathan is pictured as a monster with seven heads. At the beginning of his argument, Job wants Leviathan’s help in blotting out the day he was born (Job 3:8). At the end of the book, Job admits that Leviathan is better left in God’s control.

An Old Story

The ancient world knew of a work called the Legend of King Keret. His story is preserved on three clay tablets dating back some fourteen centuries before the birth of Jesus. Like Job, Keret endured terrible losses during his lifetime. But eventually the gods took pity on him and restored everything.

Priceless

Chapter 28 of Job describes the priceless character of wisdom. All the treasures of the earth, even the purest gold, cannot compare with the

gleaming brilliance of wisdom. Where can such a treasure be found? It is a gift from God.

Job on the Clock (bc)



Ezekiel c. 593–573

Aramaic copy of Job c. first century AD

Job's experiences were already legendary in the lifetime of the prophet Ezekiel who preached nearly six hundred years before the time of Jesus. But it is difficult to determine just when the book of Job was written since the book contains no references to known historical events. An Aramaic translation of Job dating from the first century AD was discovered in one of the caves at Qumran.

As you read the book of Job...



In the first two chapters the scenes shift back and forth between heaven and earth. What do we gain by watching Job from the vantage point of heaven?

Job's response to his tragedy is "the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." What do his words reveal about his outlook on life? Do you share Job's outlook?

We hear from Job's wife only at verse 2:9, but she stays with him through it all. What kind of person do you think she was?

Three friends spend time with Job. What friends would you choose to share your pain? What would you want them to say?

Read over Job 7. This passage is sometimes read at funerals. What comfort would mourners find in it?

Job describes how God made him in 10:8–12. What images would you use to describe how God made you?

What do you think of Job's litany of things God does in 12:17–25?

Note how abandoned Job feels in chapter 19. When you feel abandoned or alone, what images do you use to describe your feelings?

In 27:1–6, Job is so confident of his innocence that he swears to it by God. But what do you think of the way he speaks of God in this oath?

Where do you look for wisdom? Find an answer in Job 28.

In chapter 29 Job describes his former life. What kind of person was he?

Job gives concrete examples of his moral character in chapter 31. What do you find most noble about his character?

God appears to Job after Elihu speaks. Has Elihu said anything to prepare Job for God's arrival?

Do you see any difference in Job's outlook on life at the end of his story?

How would this book help you face your suffering and losses?

Three Spiritual Lessons From Job

- Suffering can lead to a deeper relationship with God
- God never abandons us
- The most perfect response in life is to bless the name of God

PSALMS

A gymnasium for the soul—that is how Saint Ambrose described the book of Psalms, also called the Psalter. We moderns would probably use the term fitness center. But this saint's point is that in the psalms people will find a wealth of inspiration to make their faith lives stronger.

For example, there are psalms offering spiritual guidance, psalms to help people express how they feel about their relationship with God, even psalms to help people work through anger or frustration, and of course psalms to help people celebrate all the good things God does for them.

If we are looking for insight on walking the journey of faith, there are psalms known as instruction, or “torah” psalms. Examples are psalms 1, 19 and 119. They teach us that the Word of God is a dependable guide for life. If we follow its guidelines, we will find ourselves on the path that leads to life. If we ignore the Word of God, we run the risk of walking along a path that may prove hurtful for us.

There are psalms to help us work through times of doubt. Especially helpful here are psalms 37 and 73. They begin with the psalmist wondering if there really is any advantage to living life in faithful relationship with God. People who ignore God altogether still seem to be living meaningful and prosperous lives. Yet there is greater promise in walking

with God. The sands of time can shift without warning. But a life lived for God will find the strength to endure any hardship.

There are psalms to help us celebrate times when we are full of confidence. A series of psalms known as the Psalms of Ascent seem suited for times like these. Some believe psalms 120 to 134 were originally associated with mounting the steps leading to the Jerusalem temple. Whatever their origin, they do seem to carry us upward with their words and images of celebration and faith. And if we are feeling especially joyful, there are the Alleluia Psalms that serve as a grand finale to the Psalter.

At the other end of the emotional scale are the penitential psalms. Traditionally there are seven of them—6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143. The most well known of these is Psalm 51, associated with David's repentance over his sin with Bathsheba. David's powerful images of cleansing and purification will resonate with anyone seeking spiritual freedom. And in return for his restoration with God, David promises to inspire others by telling them of the all the advantages he now sees in a right relationship with God.

If we are in a reflective mood, there are psalms that look back on all the good things God has done for us. Psalm 78 reviews the highs and lows of Israel's relationship with God, a pattern we may recognize in our own life with God. Psalm 104 finds inspiration in the countless gifts we take for granted each day in creation.

If asked to identify our favorite psalms, we could probably name a few without hesitation. "The LORD is my shepherd" (Psalm 23) would be on the top of the list for most of us. But, however familiar we may be with individual psalms, there is also an advantage in gaining an overview of the entire book as the following paragraphs seek to do.

The tone for the book is established by the very first psalm. It introduces us to two ways in life. One leads to life; the other to trouble and sadness. Naturally, the one whose way is illuminated by the Law of Moses will find happiness. And those who scoff at God will discover a less satisfactory way in life.

The five books of the Law of Moses is probably the basis for the division of the psalter into five books. Bibles clearly mark the five with headings.

Themes of struggle and hardship seem to prevail in the first three sections of the book of Psalms. Think of the penitential psalms (6, 32, 38 and 51) or the number of psalms associated with some hardship in the life of David.

In the fourth section, things get a little brighter with all the psalms celebrating the power of God to save. Of course the final section is dominated by psalms of ascent leading us up to God—psalms 120 to 134—and psalms of alleluia like psalms 146 to 150.

So when we read the psalms it is as if we are making a gradual progression from struggle to freedom. So the book seems to celebrate the very theme exhibited in the first psalm: a life focused on God will lead to joy. And, of course, if you are reading the psalms you are focused on God.

The 150 chapters of the book of Psalms:

- 1 — 41 Book One—the challenge of walking with God
- 42 — 72 Book Two—struggles along the way
- 73 — 89 Book Three—pleas for help
- 90 — 106 Book Four—God’s power to save
- 107 — 150 Book Five—songs of praise

A Suggestion

You may find it helpful to concentrate on the images used by the psalmists. Consider for example the very first psalm. It uses the image of a tree to represent someone who is close to God. What is it about a tree that makes it a fitting image for a person? You could probably identify a few rather quickly. They might include things like having roots, growing up toward heaven, supplying fruit for the hungry or shade for the weary. After a little while, you may discover an entirely new way to pray the psalms simply by reflecting in this way on the many images in the Psalter.

Longest Psalm

With 176 verses, Psalm 119 is by far the longest psalm in the book. Its length derives from the fact that it devotes eight lines to each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. As we read this psalm, we follow the psalmist’s journey of faith. It begins with a prayer asking for God’s help in facing the everyday challenges to faith; it concludes with the psalmist confident that God has heard the prayer.

Shortest Psalm

With just two verses, Psalm 117 is the shortest of the psalms. But it has a far-reaching message. It invites all the nations of the world to praise God because God’s faithfulness lasts forever.

Cursing Psalms

It may come as a shock that there are psalms asking God to bring harm to others. Psalms 58, 83, 109 and 137 include very strong language directed against perceived enemies. In real life, people do struggle with such feelings. But letting those feelings out and turning them over to God is an important step in the healing process.

Laughter

In psalms 2:4 and 37:13, we find God laughing. What does God find humorous in these psalms? The answer: the pretensions of people who ignore heaven or think they can really interfere with God's plan to bring salvation to the world.

Royal Psalms

Some psalms seem to have connections with the lives of the kings. Psalm 20 was perhaps a royal prayer before battle. And Psalm 45 may have been for a royal wedding. Psalms like 72 and 110 seem to look forward to a future king who will fulfill the divine promise to David that his line would go on and on.

Psalms on the Clock (BC)



David c. 1000

Return from Exile c. 500

More than seventy psalms are said to have David as their composer. That would make some of them nearly three thousand years old. Many psalms—the royal psalms especially—may be associated with the weddings, coronations and battles of David's successors. Other psalms, like Psalm 137, echo the sad days of the Exile in Babylon. Although precise dates are difficult to come by, some of the psalms do seem to be among the oldest compositions in the Bible.

As you read the book of Psalms...



What do you think makes Psalm 1 a suitable introduction to the book of Psalms?

In his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2), Saint Peter turned to Psalm 16 for proof from Scripture that Jesus would rise from the dead. What verse from Psalm 16 do you think he found especially relevant to his message?

Note the powerful images in Psalm 29. What do you think inspired the composer of this psalm?

Each line of Psalm 34 begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Could you compose a hymn of praise to God using the English alphabet?

Psalm 44 celebrates what the people have learned from their ancestors about God. What could you add to this lesson from your own family history?

Psalm 51 is one of the most celebrated psalms of repentance. Read it over and discover its beauty for yourself.

Psalm 69:9 is quoted when Jesus cleanses the temple (John 2:17). Read the entire psalm to discover the object of the Lord's zeal.

Every day the Liturgy of the Hours may begin with Psalm 95. What makes this psalm a fitting start to each day?

Psalms 113 to 118 were sung at Passover. What makes them appropriate for that feast?

Psalms 120 to 134 are thought to have accompanied a procession to the temple. What makes them appropriate for such a procession?

Psalm 136 is a litany of the good things God did for Israel. What would you include in a litany based on your experience of God?

Psalms uses many vivid images for God. Which images do you find most meaningful?

Would you agree with Saint Ambrose's teaching that the psalms are a gymnasium for the soul?

Three Spiritual Lessons From Psalms

- Praying the Psalms gives us strength for the spiritual journey
- Any human emotion can be the starting point for reaching out to God
- The whole range of life is an occasion to offer praise to God