

“How to Read the Bible For All It’s Worth: Wisdom Literature”  
Song of Songs 4:1-7

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Scripture: Song of Songs 4:1-7

Sermon:

***Introduction...***

Do you want to make good decisions in life? Do you want to know how to live well? A while back we did a series on happiness and talked about happiness as the quality or characteristic of a life well lived. The struggle, though, is what does it mean to live life well?

Do you have kids? Do you want your kids to be successful in life? Do you want them to live well? Do you want your kids to live lives to be congratulated?

These are literally age old questions. These are the kinds of questions that people have been asking and wrestling with and wanting answers to for literally thousands of years! And these are the kinds of questions that “wisdom literature” wrestles with.

In the ancient world, many cultures including Israel had people who studied wisdom, who gathered wise sayings and wisdom literature. These people formed a class of wise teachers and scribes. The Bible even mentions wise women who would fill this role! (2 Sam 20:16; Prov 14:1) These wise people, in all cultures, would collect, compose and refine wisdom proverbs and discussions. [Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read The Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 239] The subject in question was always about how to make good choices in life. We can read this ancient literature today and compare it to Israelite wisdom literature. They cover many of the same topics, but Israelite wisdom literature contains an important distinctive feature. **In the Jewish mind, the good life was a godly life. For Jews, wisdom has its source in the LORD.** This is the main difference between the wisdom literature we find in the Bible and the wisdom literature from surrounding nations or even the Greeks. For Jews, wisdom is related to godliness.

In the Bible, there are four books and a number of individual Psalms that fall into this category of “wisdom literature.” These books are Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs or Song of Solomon. These books all deal with questions about making wise decisions, about living life well and about making good choices. Interestingly, Song of Songs doesn’t actually mention God explicitly! But because it has been included in the Bible and it does talk about making wise decisions in the very important area of human sexuality and romantic expression. It assumes that sexual pleasure finds its greatest expression within the faithful marriage of one man and one woman. We’re going to take a look at a passage from this book in a little while.

But before we get into our case study, we need to talk about how to read wisdom literature. Although the questions about how to live life to the full, how to live successfully are millennia old, the way people talked about it and some of the terms they used in the Bible are foreign to us. If we are not well equipped, we will easily miss the point they are making. Instead of grasping the wisdom they are offering us, we will draw foolish interpretations from them and think we are wise!

***Text***

Let’s read our passage for today, as I mentioned from Song of Songs, and then we will explore some tools we need to read wisdom literature. We are going to take a brief look at how each of the books of wisdom in the Bible should be approached and then tackle our passage in detail.

Please read with me Song of Songs (in some translations entitled “Song of Solomon”) 4:1-7. Remember, this is in the Bible!

***Wisdom***

One of the first things you will notice about wisdom literature is that it is in the form of poetry. Not only Song of Songs, but all of it is in verse rather than paragraphs or prose. This means that what we have already learned about Hebrew poetry applies here as well. This means that we can look for lines that work together, explaining or expanding on one another. Or, sometimes lines form a contrast with one another in order to highlight something or emphasize something.

Hebrew poetry tends to focus more on images than rhyming or similar sounds. This is a good thing for

those of us who don't read Hebrew! Part of the reason for this is that ancient Israel was an oral culture, not a written culture. The images would have stuck in people's minds more effectively than just sounds or words. It also means that some of the writings, like the book of Proverbs, were designed to be short and memorable rather than exhaustively precise.

But what is wisdom all about? I said before it's about making good choices, about living a godly life. Wisdom is not about IQ. [Fee and Stuart, p. 236] It's not about being smart, having a lot of information in your head or being able to do complex math without a pencil and paper. **Wisdom is the ability to make godly choices in life, which is achieved by applying God's truth to life.** [Fee and Stuart, p. 233] By this definition, wisdom is very practical. Wisdom is action. [Fee and Stuart, p. 235] It's all about application. Very smart people may live very foolish lives. Very smart people may also live very ungodly lives, which in the Biblical understanding, makes them fools.

This brings us to another important point. What is the opposite of wisdom? [folly] So **the opposite of a wise man is a fool**. As you read wisdom literature, as you read passages from Proverbs, Job, or Ecclesiastes (not so much Song of Songs) keep in mind that the fool is the person who is ungodly. They are making ungodly choices in life. They may be making decisions that will gain them power, or wealth or influence. They may be successful in worldly terms. They may experience tremendous pleasures. But, since they are not living a godly life, they will ultimately be shown to be a fool.

Because wisdom is not about IQ, being a fool is not about IQ either. Smart, successful, powerful people may turn out to be fools because they have been ignoring God, disobeying God or otherwise living an ungodly life. We need to keep this in mind as we read because in the world around us there are many people who, by secular standards at least, are living very successful lives. But they are ungodly people living ungodly lives. They will ultimately be seen as fools, maybe not in this life, but in the next for sure.

If wisdom is about making godly decisions and living a godly a life, then **wisdom is about our orientation to God**. [Fee and Stuart, p. 236] Proverbs 9:10 and Psalm 111:10 both say that "fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." But again, without a bit of cultural background, we can easily misunderstand these two verses and get the wrong idea about the proper orientation we should have toward God.

Fear, today, typically conjures up images of cringing, hiding and turning away from something. When using our modern understanding of fear, we may foolishly think these verses tell us we need to be afraid of God, we need to cower and cringe before God. But this doesn't fit very well with the image of God we see in Jesus. People rarely cringed before Jesus unless he was clearing the temple. So what does it mean to fear God then? **To fear means to hold in awe and wonder**. [Fee and Stuart, p. 236] So fear of the LORD means to hold God in awe and wonder. Yes, we should have a bit of trepidation when thinking about God. We should be a little unsure of ourselves. But it should be in a healthy sense.

I remember when I was about 10 or 11 years old we went to visit a farm my grandfather bought year ago in Illinois. My family still owns the farm and rents the land out to legitimate farmers (nobody in my family can farm!). These farmers we went to visit owned a couple of horses. As a 10 year old, I was excited at the thought of riding one of these horses! I had ridden horses at a summer camp a few years before and I was looking forward to doing it again. [pic] Then I saw the horses! I had forgotten how big horses were! I knew these horses were friendly and tame. I was excited at the thought of riding one. But when confronted with a real horse's size and power, I was intimidated! But this was a healthy fear. It meant I didn't take the horse for granted. I listened to the instructions on riding it. I had a healthy respect for the fact that I would be at this animal's mercy. This didn't mean I ran away screaming. I didn't cringe and cower before the horse (although if it had been angry and started rearing up and kicking its hooves I would have!). But I treated the horse with respect, I was careful and mindful of my behaviour around it.

When we come before God, we need to have a similar fear, or healthy respect for God. We need to be in awe of God. We need to hold God in wonder. His power and majesty should put us in our place. We should have a healthy fear of God, not because we think he will smite us unexpectedly, but because we should be aware of his power and our weakness. We should be aware of his majesty and our ordinariness. We should be aware of the fact that we are completely at his mercy! This is what we should think when we read in the Bible about "fearing God" or "fear of the LORD."

Now, let's think about this for a moment. If fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and fear means awe and wonder, then awe and wonder for God is the beginning of wisdom. That is, awe and wonder for God is the beginning of living a godly life! Being in awe of God, holding God in wonder is the beginning of living a successful life and making godly decisions. As I mentioned a moment ago, wisdom is about our orientation towards God.

What is another word we talk about a lot here at Priory that involves our orientation toward God? [repentance!] Repentance is about changing our life trajectory so that we are heading straight for God. So repentance, in one way of thinking about it, is changing our life's direction so that we begin to make godly decisions. Repentance is also the appropriate response to God's awesome power. When we have a healthy respect for God, when we hold God in awe and wonder, the appropriate response is repentance! I would even suggest that one of the causes of repentance, one of the things that generates repentance in us, is wonder for God, being awestruck by God. Living out a life of repentance then means living a life of godliness, seeking to apply God's truth to our daily decisions, so that we become wise. **A lifestyle of repentance goes hand in hand with life of wisdom.**

It was only at the tail end of putting together this sermon that I made this connection with repentance and wisdom, but I think it's important. As Christians, reading wisdom literature through the lens of repentance should help us make the connection with application today! I have not tried it personally, but I wonder what it would be like to read through Proverbs and mentally replace the word "wisdom" with "repentance"?

If a wise person is living a life of repentance, trying to make godly decisions and live a godly life, then the fool is the person who is not repentant. **The fool is the person whose life is not oriented toward God.** The fool is hard hearted towards God. The fool is the person who denies God, or at least denies God the authority over his or her life that God is due by reason of being God!

### ***Proverbs***

So if this is what wisdom is about, how do we read the books containing "wisdom literature"? Let's begin with the most famous one, the book of Proverbs. **Proverbs is a collection of short, memorable sayings about living life well, about living a godly life and making godly decisions.** Another topic that Proverbs discusses is how to raise your kids so that they, too, live a godly life, making godly decisions and being successful in God's eyes. It's ok to want your children to grow up with "a reasonable level of success in life- including social acceptance, moral uprightness, and freedom from want." [Fee and Stuart, p. 239] When we keep in mind that this comes from wisdom, applying God's truth to our daily lives, we keep the appropriate goals in mind. We don't aim to be super rich in material possessions. We aim to be rich in godliness. Perhaps some material blessing will come our way, but always we know God will provide!

Wisdom, in Proverbs, takes a number of forms, or shows up in a number of characteristics and activities. Such things include care for the poor, respect for government leaders, setting appropriate boundaries for children, moderation in the use of alcohol and respect for parents. In contrast, folly or foolishness includes violent crime, careless promises, laziness, malicious dishonesty and sexual impurity "which is especially odious to God and harmful to an upright life." [Fee and Stuart, p. 239]

In order to help people remember the individual proverbs, they tend to be short and vivid. They do not explain or work out all the details of the truth to which they point. Proverbs are like parables in that they express truth symbolically. They do not express "iron clad" guarantees from God! [Fee and Stuart, p. 243]

What do I mean by this? Well, let's consider a modern day proverb as an example. Some of you are hopefully familiar with the saying, "A stitch in time saves nine." This basically means that you should deal with a problem quickly, while it's small, rather than allowing it to become a bigger problem requiring a bigger solution. The image is that of a tear in a piece of clothing or something else that is cloth. A single stitch, when the hole is small, means you won't have to do 9 stitches later when the untreated hole gets bigger. But this is an image used to point to the broader truth of dealing with problems quickly. It applies to more than stitches and sowing. The nine stitches rhymes with time. It is not a calculation. It's not a formula for how many stitches will be saved later on.

Similarly, many of the proverbs in the Bible are not to be pressed in the details. They are images used to convey a truth that applies much more broadly than the image itself. Similarly, they are not carefully worded

theological treatises covering every aspect that may come up. In the book they cite a number of examples, but a particularly good example is Prov 16:3, “**Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans.**” This is not an iron clad promise. This is a general guideline. It does not mean that if you make a foolish decision, a hasty decision but “commit it to the Lord” that God will override your own foolishness and make the plan work out. What it does mean, is that in general, over time, “lives committed to God and lived according to his will succeed *according to God’s definition of success.*” [Fee and Stuart, p. 243]

Sometimes, people take individual proverbs out of context and press the details too far. For instance, Proverbs 22:26-27 speaks of not putting up security for debts if you’re not sure you can pay. It’s speaking of being prudent and careful with your money. Some people, however, press this to mean that we should never take out a loan, ever! This includes never having a mortgage.

Now, on the one hand, I do think many of us today are foolish about taking out a loan when it comes to using our credit cards! That is, technically speaking, a loan we are taking at very high interest. How many of us have gotten into debt with credit cards! We need to remember the truth of this proverb! But we shouldn’t press the details too far or be too wooden in reading it. If we are, then we actually miss the truth is it conveying and make it say something God never intended.

Because individual proverbs are designed to be memorable rather than fully or exhaustively precise, we need to take the proverbs together as a whole. As usual, we need to not take individual proverbs out of context. Instead, we should consider the collection of proverbs as a whole to allow them to speak together. In this way, we will avoid extremes.

### **Job**

Job is another of the wisdom books. Job can be hard for us to read! Why? A number of reasons: first, it’s poetry and we are used to reading prose. Second, most of Job is in the form of dialogue or discussion. This means to understand it well, we have to read long sections of people talking and talking. It’s even worse than one of my sermons! Third, much of what Job’s friends tell him turns out to be wrong! This means that after we’ve waded through line after line of poetic dialogue, we find out it was all wrong to start with!

**[pic]** This is why Job can be hard to read. But if we do set out to read it, what should we keep in mind? First, Job represents some of the oldest material in the Bible. If you read carefully, you will notice that Job’s wealth is measured in sheep and herds of animals, not gold! Herds of animals were money that moved.

Second, Job is able to offer sacrifices to God without a priest serving as intermediary. This means Job was pre-Exodus, pre-Tabernacle. Job is set during a time like that of Abraham and the Patriarchs in which wealth was measured in flocks and herds and before the priestly system was set up in the Covenant between God and Israel.

The third sign that this material is early comes from the opening narrative. God’s heavenly court is reminiscent of much older courts than that of, say, King Saul or King David. Included in God’s heavenly court is the equivalent of our crown prosecutor, “the accuser.” The formal name for this role of chief accuser is “the s’atan” from which we get the word “Satan.” This shows us that Job is very early material.

But what is Job about? What kind of wisdom does it deal with? In contrast to Proverbs, **Job is all about the problem of suffering.** Why do righteous people experience suffering? Does suffering or affliction mean God is displeased with us? Is it a sign of unrepentant sin in our life? This is what Job’s supposed friends suggest. They keep urging Job to confess whatever hidden sin he is concealing so God can restore him. Job keeps protesting that he’s done nothing wrong! But his friends all believe that such suffering as Job has endured must have its roots in some sin in Job’s life.

**The fact that Job’s friends are wrong means we need to be careful taking verses from Job out of context.** We may be quoting a person who, later in the book, is shown to be wrong!

In the end, God himself shows up and vindicates Job, while also putting Job in his place. God tells the friends that they are wrong, that Job has done nothing wrong, but also that God’s plans are so much more complex and deep than anything we can imagine that it’s not our place to demand of God why certain things have happened to us. Not all that happens to us in this life is fair. Not everything we experience, good or ill, is what we deserve. When bad things happen, it may or may not be God’s judgment being carried out against us. There is not a one to one correspondence between evil or uncomfortable things we experience or endure and sins we have committed.

Interestingly, the prologue to Job shows us why Job is allowed to endure so much! The prologue shows us that Job's suffering was used to demonstrate that there are, in fact, righteous people obey God for more than the blessings that God gives. That was the accusation Satan made- that people only love God because God gives them blessings! The whole discussion in Job fails to take this into account because the people on the ground are unaware of what was happening in God's throne room. The real or ultimate truth of a situation is only visible from a heavenly perspective.

As Christians, we know this is true. We understand that sometimes what happens in this world is unfair. But we have a hope of which Job was unaware. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, we have confidence that we, too, will one day be resurrected. We have confidence and hope that Jesus will one day bring judgment and set all things right. That Job remained faithful to God throughout his suffering without this future hope is quite remarkable!

### *Ecclesiastes*

Now we come to Ecclesiastes. This is another difficult book for us to read. Like Job it is in poetic form. It is also mostly dialogue, or technically monologue. The narrator or speaker is the "Teacher." He spends most of the book pondering life and calling so much of it "meaningless," "vanity," "futility," or literally "vapour." We are not sure exactly what he means by this word, but it creates a rather hopeless sense to the book.

That said, when one reads the whole book and allows it to speak as a unit, instead of individual verses being taken out of context, the book is about the meaning of life. Is it worth it to live for God or not? Interestingly, **there is no mention of the afterlife in Ecclesiastes**. There is no hope for heaven or assurance of future judgment. Yet, in spite of this, the Teacher comes to the conclusion that yes, it is worth it to live for God! God is the single, ultimate reality who gives the gift of life, including life's burdens. God's ways are not always clear to us, or understandable. Life may seem like a cycle of "same old, same old" while we are experiencing it and life is not always fair. But in spite of all this, wisdom is still found in living a godly life! [Fee and Stuart, p. 253]

Things to keep in mind while reading Ecclesiastes include the fact that the Teacher's perspective is not always God's perspective! The Teacher is wrestling with the hard questions in life and does not always have an answer. In some ways, the book is like Job only without the appearance of God at the end to vindicate Job and set the record straight!

### *Song of Songs*

Now, finally, we come to Song of Songs. This book is a strange addition to the Bible. Why? Because it doesn't mention God, ever! Also, it is all about sex! **Song of Songs is about the joy and excitement of sex within marriage**. This is rather startling when you read it. It doesn't read like many other books of the Bible. I remember hearing at one time that over the centuries Jewish boys were not allowed to read this book until they were a certain age! It was too mature in content, too racy!

This has also baffled and frustrated commentators for thousands of years. We are not comfortable with such discussions of sexuality. As a result, many Jewish interpreters as well as Christian interpreters have tried to allegorize the book and make it about God's love for his people or Jesus' love for the church. [Fee and Stuart, p. 255] But that is not what the plain meaning of the text is! If you sit down and read this book, there is no sense that it is about anything other than a man and woman deeply in love talking about enjoying physical intimacy with one another.

The structure of the book is a series of songs sung in turn by the wife and the husband. They speak in glowing terms of one another as well as giving appreciative descriptions of one another's bodies! They speak of the desire they have for one another and their yearning to be together.

Consider the passage we read earlier. You may find it helpful to open to it once again. Chapter 4 opens with the husband speaking, "How beautiful you are my darling!" Then, in typical fashion for Hebrew poetry, he repeats the concept of the line, "Oh, how beautiful!" The following verses use a variety of images to describe her beauty. "Your eyes are like doves" means they are white and beautiful. Her hair is like a flock of black goats running down a hill, meaning she has long, flowing black hair, perhaps curly. Her teeth are like a flock of freshly shorn sheep, coming up from being washed, which is an expansion on the first half of the line. Similarly, he says each of her teeth has a twin, none is alone, which is another repetition. Basically, she has a nice smile with all her

teeth!

The husband moves on to her lips, like a red ribbon, her mouth is lovely. Her temples are blushed red and round like halves of a pomegranate. She has a long, delicate neck with beautiful bangles or necklaces on it, like a tower hung with shields. Then comes the steamy stuff! Her breasts are like two fawns, meaning “tender, delicate not fully grown yet.” [NIV Study Bible, p. 1024] Expanding on that line, her breasts are like “twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies.”

Verse 6 promises that all night, until the dawn comes, he will enjoy intimacy with her. The “mountains of myrrh” and “hill of incense” are metaphors for the intimacy of lovers. [NIV p. 1024] This is pretty steamy stuff! And it’s in the Bible!

What are we to do with this book? First, avoid the temptation to allegorize it. Let it be what it’s actually about- the love between a husband and wife. “Not everything has to be religious to be godly.” [Fee and Stuart, p. 239] God created sex to be wonderful. The fact that we are uncomfortable with it has more to do with our abuses and misuses of sex than anything else. God made sex awesome and this book is preserved in Scripture to remind us of that. God preserved this book as a counter to our flawed and twisted uses of sex.

We live in a culture that is preoccupied and obsessed with sex. But rarely if ever does it talk about sex in its proper context- that of a marriage between a man and a woman. Song of Songs is a helpful counter to the over-sexed culture in which we live. Our culture teaches that the best sex is without commitment. It teaches that sexual satisfaction comes from having multiple partners. Our culture pities and shames people who have not had sex, especially if they are virgins well into adulthood. God’s word for his people needs to speak out against these wrong, foolish beliefs in our culture. As God’s people we need to model sexual faithfulness and the joy of sex within our marriages. Song of Songs celebrates married love and provides permission and a model for a husband and wife to be madly in love with one another and to take joy in one another’s bodies and in the intimacy that comes from sex.

### ***Application***

So how do we apply these books? How do we bring forward the truths that they contain? As always, with any part of the Bible, we need to discern first what God was saying to the original readers and hearers of these words. Then, once we know his message to them, we can start to figure out his message to us.

Wisdom literature, because it deals with such difficult topics as the problem of suffering, the seemingly trivial nature of life given that we all die in the end, and, at the other end of the spectrum, something as exciting but also as taboo as sexual desires between a husband and wife, needs to be read carefully. We need to read entire books at a time. Or at least be willing to take into account the message of the whole book before trying to figure out the message of one or two verses. Context, context, context!

But when we take the time to read these books well, remembering that wisdom is about living a godly life, we can find tremendous application for ourselves. Wisdom is about our orientation to God. Wisdom and repentance are closely linked. Furthermore, we have the Holy Spirit now. Paul speaks extensively, especially in Galatians 5, about living by the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. Wisdom is about making godly choices. Wisdom is about applying God’s truth to our decisions and daily life. This sounds a lot like walking with the Spirit! It sounds to me like wisdom is linked to the fruit of the Spirit, those character traits that reflect godliness.

Lastly, let me make one more connection for you that will hopefully inspire you to read the wisdom literature in the OT, or at least grasp its significance. In the Gospel of John, chapter 1 talks about the divine Word, the Logos, through which the universe was created. This divine Logos then came to earth in the form of a man, Jesus. **The Greek concept of Logos is “personified wisdom.”** The Logos is the divine “rational principle that governs all things.” [NIV Study Bible, p. 1621]

What does this mean? This means that Jesus is the personification of wisdom, the personification of living a godly life. Jesus is wisdom incarnate. He is godly living in person. And John knew this when he wrote John 1. He deliberately drew on the Jewish concepts of wisdom, shaped by Greek thought too, when he chose this word to open his Gospel. So John is making a careful, thoughtful statement about Jesus connecting him to wisdom. We would do well to see this connection and then revisit the wisdom literature in the OT understanding that this can shed light on who Jesus is and what godly living in Christ looks like.