

SESSION 4: PEOPLE & MISSION

PREPARATION FOR THE SESSION

Read Job 1-3, 40; Proverbs 1, 7-8, 12; Ecclesiastes 1, 7, 12; Song of Songs 1.

Summary of the Video: Module 2, Episode 4

Throughout the course we look at God, Gospel, People and Mission. Into each of these broad categories we can develop a picture of what the Bible teaches. In this session, we focus on “People” and “Mission”. We’ll look at Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. *Note:* we’ll be skipping the two sections on Psalms (1:50-11:48 and 47:50-51:05)

Under “People” we ask, “How do we understand how the People of God organize themselves, worship God, and live life?”

JOB

We need to recognize that Job is only one (though multifaceted) of the Bible’s perspectives on a complex issue. It’s not that these various perspectives disagree with one another, but rather that they each contribute an angle on suffering and pain from God’s point of view.

What’s on trial in the story is neither Job nor God but rather the principle that God always rewards or punishes those who do good or evil. The book speaks into the question of “theodicy” more than any other book. Andrew Wilson gives us several of the perspectives on suffering that come through the narrative.

PROVERBS

Proverbs is like a guidebook for successful living. The book traces “wisdom and folly” lived through various characters or manifestations: simple, scoffer, sluggard, adulteress, diligent, lady wisdom, father and son.

ECCLESIASTES

According to Ecclesiastes, everything is *Hebel* (vanity, meaningless, vapor). Life feels less substantial than a vapour; it disappears so quickly and it feels like nothing lasts. Two images (shepherding the wind and under the sun) dominate the narrative. Imagine trying to organize or give shape and structure to wind. That’s what living life feels like. In response to knowing that life is so vaporous, Ecclesiastes reminds us that life “under the sun” is not the only world that exists. There’s another world, one in which God judges all things, so “the fear of God” in anticipation of that other world is the best posture in life.

SONG OF SONGS

Don't take the images "literally" as you read! But how should we read Song of Songs? It presents us with problems. There's little indication of God's presence and even little of "spiritual" instruction. And it's unclear who the characters are and how many there might be.

Three main ways of reading the text have been adopted by believers: 1) it's a picture of God and his people, 2) it's both a love poem and a picture of Christ and the church, and 3) it's an erotic or romantic story of a married couple. Andrew Wilson concludes that while it's mainly about sex and marriage, sex and marriage are intended to point us to Christ and the church. So, in this way, Andrew Wilson says we ought to read it primarily about marriage and then apply what we learn into our view of Christ and the church.

MISSION

This section of Scripture doesn't address "Mission" all that much. So, we focus on what this section teaches about one aspect of "eschatology" (study of the culmination of all things), i.e. death. The Bible progressively illuminates more and more about what happens in death. In the earlier books, soul and flesh were seen as a single unit and so the demise of the body in death indicated to them that the soul had gone into the shadows of the grave as well. But there were always hints that something more was happening. The distinction between our visible body and invisible soul/spirit can be seen in hints and sparks from the earliest stages; this hope gains momentum as the OT carries on.

A second aspect of God's mission worth mentioning in this section of Scripture is the expansion on the idea of the "Kingdom of God". Even at its height in Solomon's reign, the kingdom wasn't as large as God had originally promised. In this period of Scripture, a shift took place in their thinking so that they began to think of God's kingdom as taking over the whole earth (rather than focusing on just the land of Israel). And his reign would never end.

Terms You'll Need to Know:

Theodicy—usually this refers to an explanation of the problem of evil and suffering in the world; normally the person would be attempting to defend God against claims of injustice.

Peter Leithart, *Solomon Among the Postmoderns*, Brazos Press, 2008.

Early Modern Age—the period of the 1500s-1800s in Europe (and its colonies).

Modernity—1700s-1920s dominated by rationalism, reason, machines, and science.

Romanticism—an approach to life (a type of life philosophy) dominated by feelings and rebellion against order, science, rationalism.

Postmodern—from about the 1950s, people in the arts, sciences, philosophy, and history began to question rationalism and authority and meaning; what results from this questioning comes out in many diverse expressions that broadly fit under the description of postmodern.

Watch Video

Watch Module 2, Episode 4 (1hr 25 minutes).

SKIP the sections on ‘Sung Worship, music and the Psalms’ (1:50-11:48) and ‘Responses to Enemies’ (47:50- 51:05)

Conquest to Monarchy

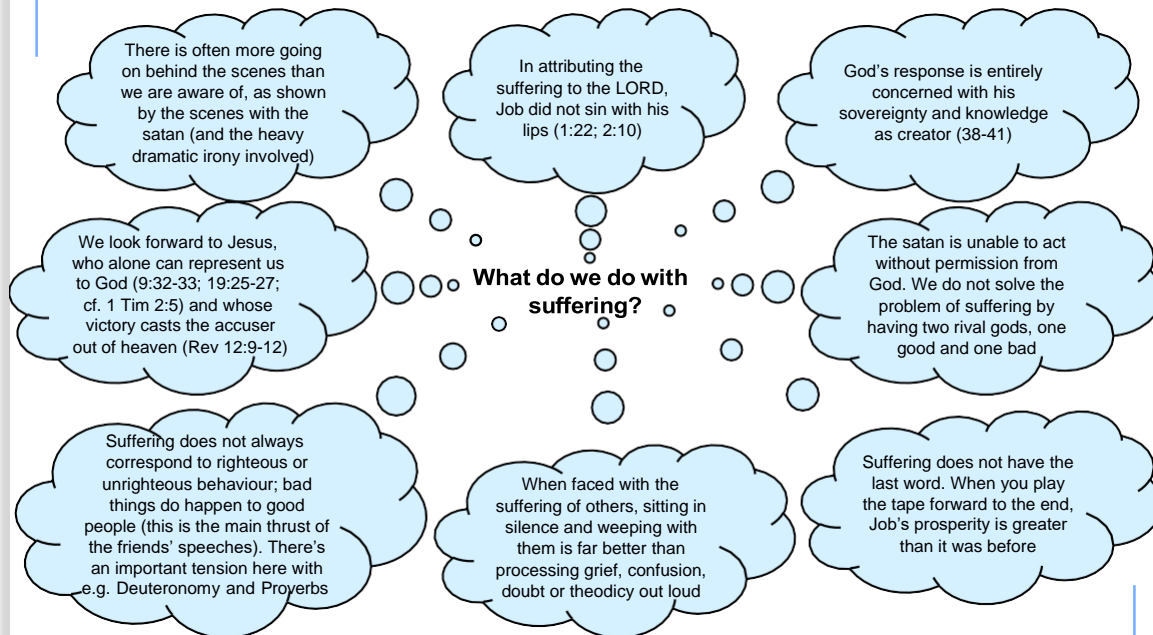
- I. The Story So Far
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The Problem of Suffering: An Overview of Job

- Job's Suffering (1-3)
 - Satan's Challenge & God's Response (1:1-12; 2:1-6)
 - Loss of Children, Wealth & Health (1:13-19; 2:7-8)
 - Job's Godly Response (1:20-22; 2:9-10)
 - The Comforter's Godly Response (2:11-13)
 - Job's Lament (3:1-26)
- Job's Comforters (4-37)
 - First Cycle (4-14): Eliphaz → Job → Bildad → Job → Zophar → Job. "Behold, blessed is the one whom God reproves; therefore despise not the discipline of the Almighty" (5:17)
 - Second Cycle (15-21): Eliphaz → Job → Bildad → Job → Zophar → Job. "Indeed, the light of the wicked is put out, and the flame of his fire does not shine" (18:5)
 - Third Cycle (22-26): Eliphaz → Job → Bildad → Job. "Is not your evil abundant? There is no end to your iniquities" (22:5)
 - Job's Speech (27-31). "Oh, that I had one to hear me!" (31:35)
 - Elihu's Speech (32-37). "Hear this, O Job; stop and consider the wondrous works of God" (37:14)
- God's Appearance (38-42:6)
 - God's Speech (38-41). "Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me"
 - Job's Repentance (42:1-6). "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know ... My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes"
- Job's Vindication (42:7-16). Health restored, more children, more wealth, long life. "The LORD blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the former part" (42:12)

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Perspectives on Suffering from Job



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Handling Ordinary Life in Proverbs

- The book of Proverbs is a compilation of collections of proverbs, mainly by Solomon (1Kings 4:29-34), but including other authors. Further additions and editing took place from Solomon's time onwards, until at least Hezekiah's time (25:1)
 - The book is a seemingly random collection of pithy proverbs and aphorisms, as well as some longer sections of poetry
 - Proverbs is a guide book for successful living. "Wisdom is competence with complex realities of life" (Tim Keller)
- The book juxtaposes two approaches to life (Wisdom and Folly) lived out by various characters
 - The wise – The scoffer / mocker – The diligent – The rich man
 - The fool – The sluggard – Lady Wisdom – The poor man
 - The simple – The adulteress – A father addressing his son – The good wife
- Topics include life, death, sex, faithfulness, money, friendships, parenting, work, speech, and so on
 - Religious themes are not prominent, but neither are they absent. The question behind much of the book is, how does faith in God affect normal life?
 - "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (9:10)
- A key question (particularly in pastoral ministry) concerns how we understand and apply Proverbs
 - It is not a collection of promises from God that will always "work", and nor is it a collection of statements which are individually always true (cf. Proverbs 26:4 and 26:5!)
 - To benefit from the book of proverbs we need to understand both the genre of the book (general principles of what is true in life, rather than guarantees), and the book as a whole (as it describes a life of Wisdom, rather than mining it for tweet-length bumper stickers)
 - A good example, which has probably bamboozled a fair number of parents, is 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it"

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Everything is *Hebel*

Vapour

- "Vapour of vapours," says the Preacher. "All is vapour" (*hebel*)
- Life is vapour, not least because it disappears so suddenly and without apparent rhyme or reason. Consequently, profit (*yitron*) is impossible for human beings (3:16-22; 9:1-6)
- It is significant that the first occurrence of *hebel* in Scripture comes with the first person who dies—as if Abel's very existence demonstrates the "vapour" of earthly life

Sources of Meaning / Happiness / Profit

- Wisdom and knowledge (1:12-18; 2:12-16)
- Self-indulgence and pleasure (2:1-11)
- Work, or toil (2:17-26)
- Wealth (4:1-16; 5:8-6:12)
- Honour (4:1-16; 5:8-6:12)
- Notice how the exact same things are still pursued today as means of making sense of the vapour, and shepherding the wind (education, sex, money, power). "There is nothing new under the sun" (1:9)

Shepherding the Wind

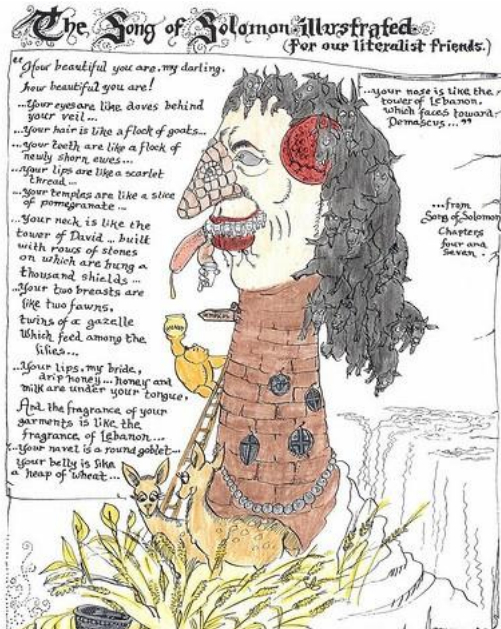
- "Behold, all is vanity, shepherding the wind" (*r'ah ha-ruach*)
- We are simply not in control of the world we live in, and trying to bring control to it is like shepherding the wind (which, of course, is the same phrase as "shepherding the Spirit")
- Human history is the story of our attempts to shepherd the unshepherdable, like herding cats (medievalism → Renaissance → modernity → romanticism, avant garde, postmodernism)

The Answer

- Despite the vapour, and the impossibility of knowing the interpretation of a thing (8:1), Solomon repeatedly says, "I know" (2:14; 3:12, 14; 9:5; 11:9). The words of the wise are like well-driven nails, fixed and stable (12:11)
- This is because the world of vapour is not the only world there is: God will judge all things (3:16-17; 11:9; 12:14). Until that day, "Fear God and keep his commandments" (12:13)
- The answer, as for Job, is eschatology

Reading Song of Songs Literally ...

... and Poetically



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Sex in the Song of Solomon

- The Song of Solomon, or 'Song of Songs' (Hebrew idiom for 'the best song'), is well-known for its beautiful poetry and depiction of romantic love. "The power of the poetry lies in the intensity of love and devotion expressed and especially in the rich imagery which permeates the descriptions of the lovers and their love" (Hubbard, *NBD*)
- Interpreting the book poses several challenges
 - Detailed erotic imagery
 - Lack of religious theme
 - Vagueness of plot
 - Myriad of interpretations
- There are three main ways of reading the text
 - Allegorically: "It's all a picture of God and his people" (e.g. Bickle – "let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" in 1:2 is a reference to the Word of God)
 - Typically: "It is both a love poem, and a description of Christ and the church" (e.g. Virgo – "your name is like perfume poured out" in 1:2 is the name of Jesus; the lover's search in ch.2 depicts God's love for us; Stuart Townend's song *From the Sleep of Ages*)
 - Erotically: "It's just an erotic love poem" (e.g. Driscoll – "I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste" in 2:3 is a reference to oral sex, and so on)
 - An adapted version of the last approach is probably best (e.g. Wilson © – "the Song of Songs is mainly about sex and marriage; but then, sex and marriage is mainly about Christ and the church")
- Pastorally and missionally, the application (surely!) must be to encourage happy, healthy sex lives amongst married couples
 - Many preachers avoid it like the plague. But this misses the opportunity to pastor married couples, and to speak positively about sex from a Christian perspective into a culture which has cheapened sex

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Conquest to Monarchy

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The Developing Theology of Death

- Human death is the inevitable consequence of the fall of humanity in Adam. "But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen 2:17)
- There is no clear distinction in the OT between physical and spiritual death. Their conception of a human being is as a unity instead of a body and a soul/spirit (the bipartite view)
 - *Nephesh* is sometimes translated soul (Josh 22:5), and simply carries idea of being alive: "a living being" rather than "an immaterial part of me." It often appears in the text without being translated as "soul" (e.g. Gen 36:6)
 - Often, *nephesh* is used as a synonym for my desire or emotion (Psa 6:3, where "my soul" is synonymous with "me"; Psa 35:9; etc)
 - Occasionally *nephesh* is used with reference to God (Isa 42:1) and animals (Gen 1:20)
 - There is no real similarity with Greek thought, in which death separates the soul from the body – but Adam & Eve's continued survival after the Fall does raise questions on the exact nature of death
- In most of the OT, there is no clear distinction between what happens to the righteous and the wicked in death
 - "All share a common destiny--the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good man, so with the sinner; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them. This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterwards they join the dead" (Ecc 9:2-3)
 - On the other hand, some texts begin to display hope of being ransomed from Sheol (Psa 49:15)
- Death is sometimes described in terms sleeping or being at rest
 - "Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb? Why were there knees to receive me and breasts that I might be nursed? For now I would be lying down in peace; I would be asleep and at rest with kings and counsellors of the earth, who built for themselves places now lying in ruins" (Job 3:11-14)
 - "Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death" (Psa 13:1-3)
 - "Then David rested with his fathers and was buried in the City of David" (1 Kings 2:10). "Rested with his fathers" is a standard expression used of the death of the Jewish Kings, used indiscriminately of good and bad kings

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GROUP MEETING:

Discussion Questions

Before getting into these specific questions, spend a few minutes discussing what struck you or stuck with you from the video. What were some of the main points? Did any of Andrew's comments or questions open up the Bible in a profound way to you? Also, ask if anything was confusing or needs clarification.

1. How does Job help us talk to our friends who ask about the pain and suffering of human life? For example, how might you use Job to answer, "How could a good God allow rape and murder?"

2. Describe how you would explain to a Christian how to apply the book of Proverbs.

3. Ecclesiastes describes this life as a "vapour", but he points us ahead to God's substantial reality. How does Ecclesiastes' viewpoint resonate with and challenge what you see in your culture? How could Ecclesiastes help you discuss the Gospel with a non-Christian?

4. What are some of the pros and cons of the various approaches to interpreting Song of Songs? What do you think of Andrew Wilson's approach?

Meditation on Scripture

Job 9:32-33

Putting This Session into Practice

We've wrestled this week with some of the complexities of life on earth. It is not cut and dried. Injustice is rampant and God's response can be hard to comprehend. Suffering surrounds us and yet we look with hope at the present and future kingdom of Christ. This week, bring situations of suffering to God in your times of prayer, and ask for his kingdom to break in.