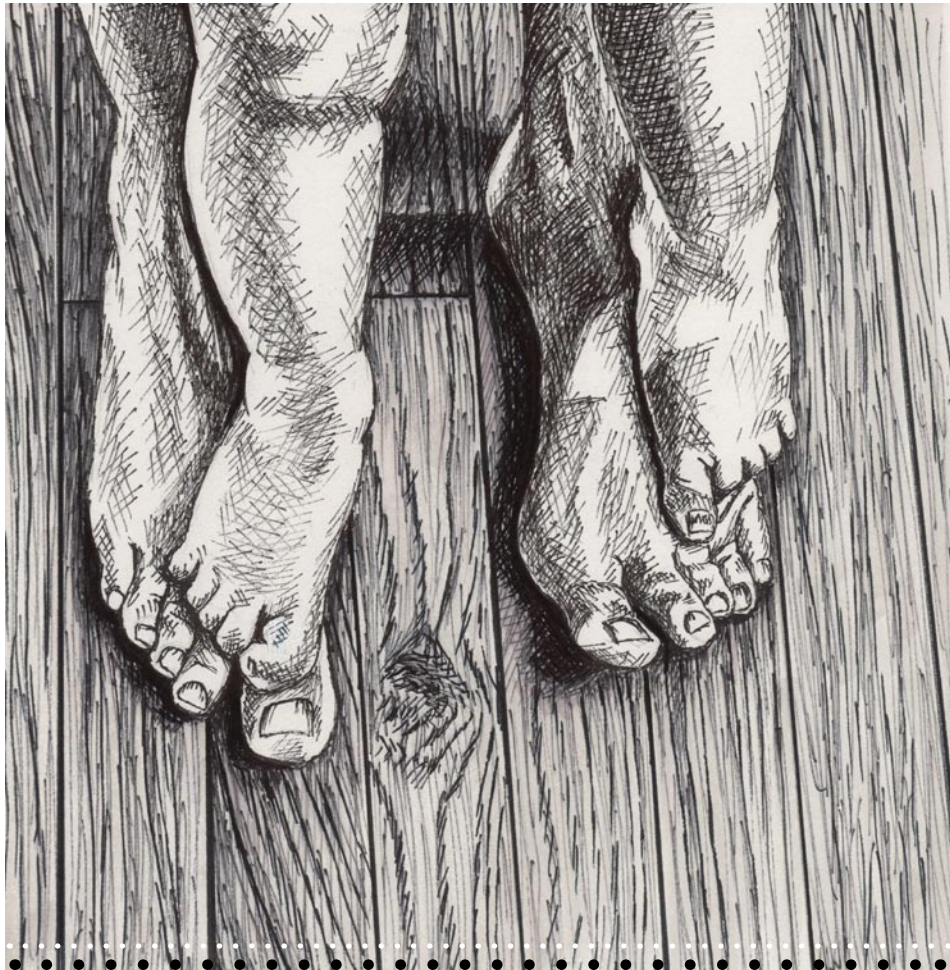


Santa Barbara Community Church

*A 14-week series on *The Way of the Wise* employs each of the 5 books of Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament to teach us about godly living and thinking.*



The Way of the Wise
Summer 2009

The Way of the Wise: Contents

A 14-week series on *The Way of the Wise* employs each of the 5 books of Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament to teach us about godly living and thinking

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Study One

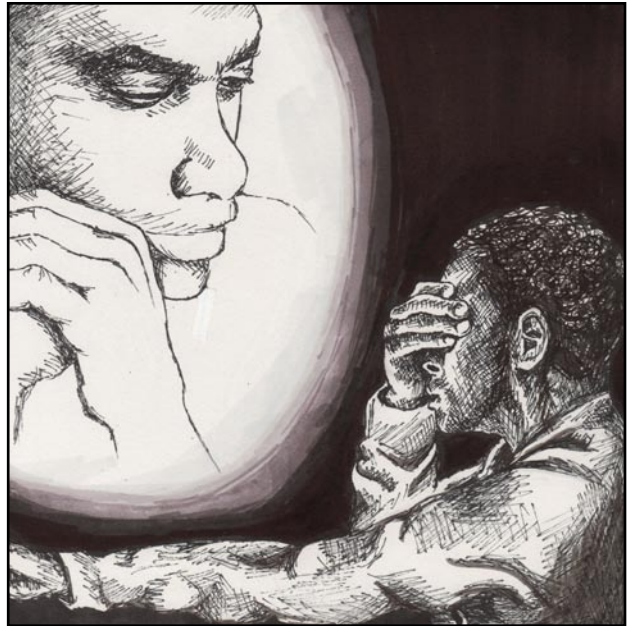
Starting With God

The fool says in his heart there is no God.
Psalm 14:1

The Wisdom books of the Old Testament are adamant that wise living must begin with an acknowledgement that there is a God. In the ancient world and through much of human history the question was usually not, is there a God? But, rather, which god is God. The intent of the Bible is to make it clear that the God described in its pages is the only God, and that he will tolerate no rivals.

Ponder these verses that speak of this God and what he thinks of rival gods. Make a few notes.

- Isaiah 44:6-20
- Psalm 96
- Psalm 115:1-8
- Ezekiel 28:1-10



The Old Testament prophets often chastised Israel for following false gods. In 1 Kings 18:16-40 we find one of the classic stories of confrontation between God and gods. Read this story that is the battle of the Gods. Notice the many ironies in this account and biting sarcasm the prophet Elijah. What can we learn about belief in God from this account?

Atheism is not a new concept. But disbelief in God has recently become a more entrenched part of our cultural landscape. In 1966 Time magazine published the cover story—*Is God Dead?* which had many wondering if this was the beginning of a new age where God was no longer necessary. In the last few years we have seen the publication of bestselling books by authors like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris. What has been called the *New Atheism* is a zealous attack on the concept of God that promotes disbelief with evangelistic zeal.

How does the apostle Paul describe *God-haters* in Romans 1:28-31?

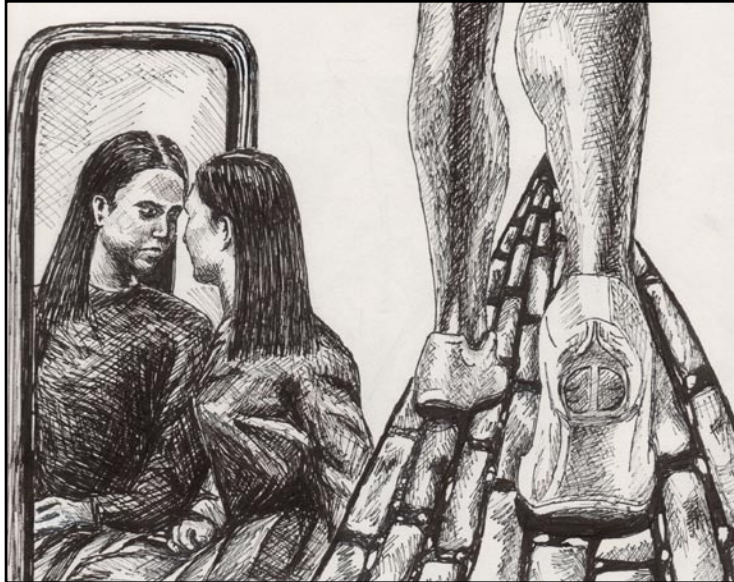
Think of neighbors, friends, co-workers, that you know who are atheists. In preparation for the teaching this Sunday engage them in a conversation asking them to explain why they are atheists. Just listen. Ponder why people drift toward unbelief.

Think about your own life. When did you believe in God? What factors influenced this belief that there was a God and that he was knowable?

Sermon Notes:

Study Two

Walking with God



The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline. Proverbs 1:7

The book of Proverbs is one of the most practical easy to understand books in the Bible. In it we find two starkly contrasting ways to live life. The foolish life is based on independent living as if there were no God directing our steps. The other approach to life is based on God's wisdom and his instructions for living. When God is at the center of our lives and we are following his instructions for life we are following the way of the wise.

What is *wisdom*? According to the Bible and the book of Proverbs in particular wisdom is not about acquiring intellectual knowledge or advanced education, but rather about skillful living under God's direction.

Read Proverbs 1:2-6. Notice that the wisdom spoken of is not theoretical. It assumes there is a right way and wrong way to live and that God has created loving principles for his people to follow. When we are obedient, following this path of wisdom, life functions as God intended.

The major hindrance to pursuing wisdom and taking this wise path is our desire to live independently of God and his direction in our lives. This could be described as the popular cult of *My Way*. Read and consider the following verses.

- Proverbs 12:5, 15

- Proverbs 14:1, 12

- Proverbs 19:3

In Proverbs we find the word *path, road* or *way* almost 100 times. This picture of a path or road is used in John Bunyan's classic book, *Pilgrims Progress*. The book is an account of a pilgrim's journey from the City of Destruction to the Heavenly City. Along the way, this pilgrim, named Christian, encounters many temptations and pitfalls as he attempts to stay on the right road. We find a similar picture of the Christian life in Proverbs 1-9.

Think about your life. Are you on the right path or road? Have you taken any detours lately? When and where do you tend to get sidetracked? What disciplines and practices help keep you on the right path?

Read Proverbs 2:1-22. List the benefits of staying on the right path of following Gods wisdom.

Ponder Proverbs 3:5-6. What does it mean in your life to follow these 3 steps to wisdom?

Trust in the Lord with all your heart →

Lean not on your own understanding → he will make your paths straight

In all your ways acknowledge him →

Sermon Notes:

Study Three

***Enormity and Intimacy***

The Lord is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens. Who is like the Lord our God, the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth? Psalm 113:4-5

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. Psalm 23:1-2



Throughout the Bible and in the Psalms in particular we find that God is huge. He created the world, rules over the nations, is enthroned above the heavens, does whatever he wants, and answers to no one. This picture of the greatness and grandeur of God is a fitting reminder to many Christians who at times are guilty of worshipping a God who is too small.

At the same time, this enormous God, whose nature is holy and whose sovereign rule is all encompassing, is intimately involved in a caring relationship with people. We often find both of these truths expressed the same portions of scripture.

Read Psalm 113. Contrast verses 1-6 with verses 7-9. What does this tell you about God?

Read Psalm 23 and 24. Again, compare the enormity of God found in Psalm 24 with the tender intimacy of God in Psalm 23.

Think of others Psalms you know where the greatness and intimate caring of God is described. This week in personal devotions spend some time in the Psalms looking for these themes. Take some notes in preparation for this Sunday's teaching.

Which of these truths about God do you find it most difficult to believe? Is it harder for you to grasp the greatness of God or his caring for you personally?

When we come to the New Testament and Jesus we find these same twin realities. Read Colossians 1:15-20 and ponder the enormity of Jesus. Write down a few thoughts on what makes Jesus so big.

Take a few minutes and thumb through the Gospel of John. Remind yourself of the caring and intimate nature of Jesus with people.

When you think of Jesus do you consider that this is actually God and that, all things were created by him and for him (Colossians 1:16) and yet at the same time he calls his disciples (and us) his friends (John 15:15)?

How would you respond to someone who said that God was distant and removed from our daily lives? Do you have faith in a God who is aloof and uninvolved in the concerns of your life, or are you trusting in a God who cares about you personally?

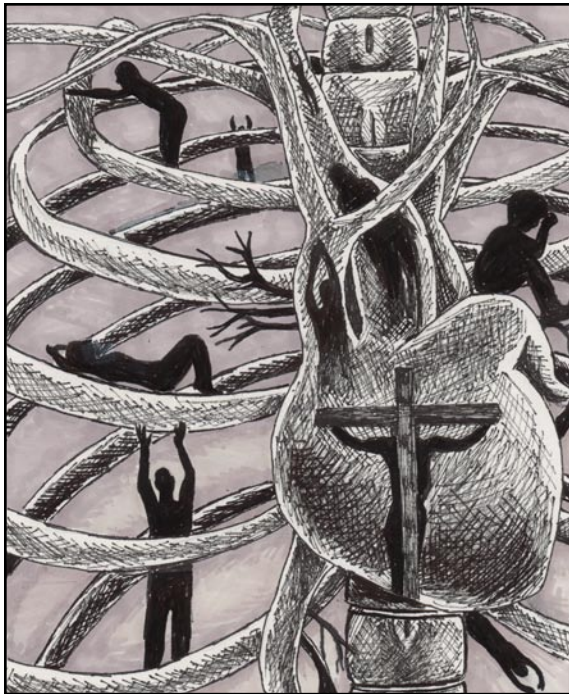
Sermon Notes:

Study Four

Two are Better than One

We live in the land of the rugged individualist—a culture that prizes the solo adventurer. We love to hear stories of one person’s lonely assault on the summit on Everest (*Will he/she make it?*), or the one-man journey, from source to mouth, down the Amazon (*What dangers did they encounter along the way?*) Our fascination with these stories comes in part from the fact that we inherently know that human ventures are best embarked on with others—that we are created for relationship.

We are drawn in to these stories because they stand outside of what feels natural. We know that, when the company of others has been removed, we are more exposed.



Why do we know this to be true? Where does this deep-seated sense of need for community and relationship come from? One could argue that it began before the beginning of time, before the creation of man. The first two sentences of the Bible reveal something very important:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. Genesis 1:1-2

Who created? Who *hovered over the waters*? Now pay attention to these words from the Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. John 1:1-4

Knowing that the *Word* is Jesus himself, what do the combined Scripture passages above tell us about God?

Read Genesis 1:27. What does it tell us about ourselves?

As we turn to the wisdom literature of the Bible, what does it have to say with respect to our need—and God’s design—for community?

Read the following two very short Psalms: 134 and 135.¹

Both Psalms are *Psalms of ascent*, meaning they were typically songs sung while journeying in large groups for the temple festivals in Jerusalem. As the Jews traveled together to converge on Jerusalem for their religious feasts and festivals, it was more than a party. They worshipped together on the road, they worshipped together in the temple, and as they gathered they did so as a *covenant community*, bound by a common faith in God.

With this in mind, what elements do you find that these Psalms all share in common?

Think through the idea of being part of a *worshipping community*. What are the specific advantages of living out your faith in the context of community? List them and share with your group.

The book of Ecclesiastes is an often misunderstood book in the wisdom literature of the Bible. Although the author is unknown, he is commonly believed to be Solomon. The book contains his reflections on (and sometimes disillusionment with) the problems of life. The book earns its place in wisdom literature because of the author’s profound truths about man’s obligation to God, regardless of circumstance.

Read the following:

Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, “For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?” This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken. Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

¹ Suggestion: Pray these Psalms together as a homegroup before you begin your discussion!

At least three benefits of community can be seen from this passage. Find the verses that correspond to each of the following benefits:

- Perspective:
- Partnership:
- Protection:

Now consider your own life. Can you name situations/experiences where God used other believers to bring you perspective, partnership, or protection? Be specific.

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul points out that believers are empowered by one Spirit and live under one Lord. The people of Israel journeyed together as a covenant community. So do Christians journey together as a spiritual community.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. What does Paul have to say about Christian community?

1 Corinthians 12:4-7 says that there are many gifts, types of service and activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. This chapter is one of the clearest teachings on what is referred to as the *priesthood of the believer* or an *every member ministry*. Romans 12 lists many gifts and means of service that are distributed to believers, including pastoring, teaching, administrating, helping, serving, giving, prophesying, exhortation, discernment, wisdom, knowledge and faith. The list could go on. For every need or role in the church there is a gift to meet that need.

How has God gifted and prepared you to serve your fellow believers in spiritual community? What does that look like in your life?

What are some of the responsibilities of spiritual community? List as many as you can. (For extra credit, support your points with a Scripture verse!)

One of the aspects of spiritual community that is both benefit and responsibility is worship. Read Psalm 122 below:

*I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”
Our feet have been standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem!*

*Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together,
to which the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.
There thrones for judgment were set,
the thrones of the house of David.*

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!
“May they be secure who love you!
Peace be within your walls
and security within your towers!”
For my brothers and companions’ sake
I will say, “Peace be within you!”
For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good.*

Count how many times you see the call to worship in the plural, rather than singular form. How many did you get? What is the point here?

We all know people who profess faith in Christ, but opt out of any kind of spiritual community. Did you know that when we confess that Jesus is our living, true Savior, we are automatically part of the Church? Even if we have refused to become a *member* in any local church congregation, it is a fact that we are saved *into* the community of the church. What does this mean? Read the following quote by Eugene Peterson:

...God never makes private, secret salvation deals with people. His relationships with us are personal, true; intimate, yes; but private, no. We are a family in Christ. When we become Christians, we are among brothers and sisters in faith. No Christian is an only child. ...Christians make this explicit in their act of worship each week by gathering as a community: other people are unavoidably present. As we come to declare our love for God, we must face the unlovely and lovely fellow sinners whom God loves and commands us to love. This must not be treated as something to put up with, one of the inconvenient necessities of faith in the way that paying taxes is an inconvenient consequence of living in a free and secure nation. It is not only necessary; it is desirable that our faith have a social dimension, a human relationship: "How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along!"¹

Psalm 122 refers to Jerusalem—*built as a city that is bound firmly together*... In some translations, the verse reads, a city at unity with itself. Picture it. *Many tribes* with different backgrounds and ethnicities all converging on Jerusalem ... to do what? To worship together as a community. It is not the geographic place itself (Jerusalem) that makes it *a city at unity within itself*—it is the unifying factor of worship that brings harmony, peace, and purpose to a *diversity of peoples*, creating community. This is a glimpse of heaven, when every tribe and nation will gather in worship of the One true God together.

Worship Him!

¹ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, IVP, pp.175- 177.

Sermon Notes:

Study Five

Together in Unity

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity. It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore. Psalm 133

Throughout the Bible God calls people to follow him, not as individuals but in community. In the Old Testament God ordained the people of Israel, a family descended from one man (Jacob, later to be called Israel), to follow him. In the New Testament God's people are the followers of Jesus, namely the Church. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments God's people are referred to with language that denotes family. Israel was a nation that was, for the most part, a blood related group, a family. Authors of the New Testament (Paul, James, Peter and John) refer to fellow believers as brothers, a family. The author of Hebrews exhorts Christians to *keep on living as brothers* (13:1). Christians are to live and function as family, in community with one another.



Psalm 133 says *Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!* (verse 1) And yes, there is an exclamation point at the end of that statement! In fact, the next two verses enhance that exclamation. The Psalmist uses two word pictures to illustrate great blessings of the Lord, and likens the unity of brothers to these blessings. The first, oil being poured over Aaron's head, running down his beard, onto his collar is a rich picture of God's elaborate blessing and anointing of Aaron to be a priest (Exodus 29). Second, the dew mentioned refers to the excessive night time dew that brought refreshment to Mount Hermon after a hot, dry day in the scorching sun. This blessing and refreshment is said to be disseminated on *Mount Zion* which was considered a sacred place for the people of God, where God decreed, as the final sentence of the Psalm expresses, the blessing of life forevermore. *How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!*

When you consider the concept of spiritual unity, what comes to mind? What contributes to this spiritual unity?

In what specific areas of a church is unity important? Why?

There are many factors that either contribute to or detract from unity. The following are three areas of life and character addressed in Scripture: words, conduct and attitudes. Look up all of the referenced passages. (They are short and close together!) Note how they relate to community.

Words

- Proverbs 11:13

- Proverbs 15:1

- Proverbs 15:4

- Proverbs 16:24

- Proverbs 16:28

- Proverbs 26:2

- Proverbs 26:20

- Proverbs 26:28

Using words, whether spoken or written, is something everybody does. Words are the main way we relate to one another. It is crucial for believers, for brothers and sisters, to get this part of life right!

This is a topic that may hit close to home. Reflect on your own use of words. What are your strengths and weaknesses? Is your speech consistent throughout all areas of your life (work, home, recreation, church, etc.)?

As a homegroup discuss how a person can improve on his or her verbal habits. What causes growth in this area? What are examples of words that we should strive for in the community of SBCC?

Conduct

In the following passages take note of what is referred to as righteous or wise compared to what is foolish or wicked. Note the behavior and how the results or consequences might affect unity.

- Proverbs 10:17
- Proverbs 12:16
- Proverbs 13:5
- Proverbs 13:20
- Proverbs 14:25
- Ecclesiastes 10:1-2

Describe conduct that would be conducive to sustaining strong fellowship and unity within a church. What kind of people do we want to be, or be around? What should guide our actions?

Attitudes

- Proverbs 10:12
- Proverbs 11:2

- Proverbs 14:8
- Proverbs 15:18
- Proverbs 16:2
- Proverbs 22:9
- Proverbs 28:25

Attitudes reflect what is inside of a person, in his or her mind and heart. List below as many attitudes as you can think of which exemplify unity and disunity.

Unity**Disunity**

What can you do to adopt attitudes that would contribute to the health and vitality of your fellow believers and SBCC? How can you encourage your brothers and sisters in Christ to hold and express godly attitudes?

In the areas of words, conduct and attitudes, how can one person's sin generate disunity? In the alternate, how does an obedient life promote good fellowship?

How have you encountered unity in your church experience(s)? Give an example of how this affected your growth as a Christian.

Reflect on the many verses you have examined regarding words, conduct and attitudes. How would you rate the unity at SBCC? What must we do to be vigilant in sustaining and expanding the quality of community that we experience?

Unity is both a blessing from God and something we must work at to maintain. Pray that SBCC would be protected in this area of church life. And enjoy how good and how pleasant it is when we live together in unity!

Sermon Notes:

Study Six

Worship



Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise, his greatness no one can fathom. Psalm 145:3

Share with your homegroup a few people who come to mind who are praise-worthy and what makes them so. You may share something about their character or a skill they possess or something they have accomplished.

There are many people worthy of our admiration, but the Scriptures make it clear there is only One we are to worship. The English word *worship* comes from the old Anglo-Saxon *weorthscipe* which later developed into *worthship* and finally into *worship*.¹ We can see from this that worship is ascribing *worthiness* to God for the praise and devotion that we offer him.

This summer study on *The Way of the Wise* began with the basic premise that wisdom begins with acknowledging that the LORD is God (study 1) and that God gives us instructions on how to best live (study 2). This God is both enormous and intimate. (Study 3) But just because there is only one God who will tolerate no rivals doesn't necessarily mean he is worthy of praise and obedience. Neither does the fact that God has a plan for our lives or that God is big, or even that he wants to be with us! (Just think for a moment about people who have wanted your time or wanted to implement their plan for your life... this alone doesn't make them worthy of praise!)

But when we look at the character of God, these other truths come into such glorious perspective that we cannot help but worship him!

Psalm 145 begins I will exalt you my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. What follows is many reasons for the praise the psalmist offers. Read this Psalm and jot down all the attributes of God's character that make him worthy of our praise.

Notice all the references to the *works* or *acts* of God. Remembering is one of the chief ways that we engage in the worship of God. As we call to mind what God has done, we are reminded of his holiness, his power, his grace.

¹ Ralph Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (1964).

Make a list of at least five works of God that cause you to marvel and worship. They can be things you've read in the Bible, ways God has intervened in more recent history, or things that God has done in your own life. Recount these with your homegroup.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Worship with our Minds

The 17th century Puritan pastor John Owen wrote, *We must not allow ourselves to be satisfied with vague ideas of the love of Christ which present nothing of his glory to our minds.*¹

Are you content with *vague ideas of the love of Christ* or are you feeding your mind with great truths about God? Share with your homegroup what you are doing to feed your mind and/or how you would like to grow in this area? Be specific.

Are there books you've read, passages you have memorized or meditated upon, etc. that have allowed your mind to feast of the glories of God? What are they?

¹ Quoted in Bob Kauflin's *Worship Matters* (2008).

Worship with our Hearts

The great hymn-writer Isaac Watts wrote,

The Great God values not the service of men if the heart be not in it: The Lord sees and judges the heart; he has no regard to outward forms of worship, if there be no inward adoration, if no devout affection be employed therein. It is therefore a matter of infinite importance, to have the whole heart engaged steadfastly for God.

Notice how the Scriptures command us to delight in God!

- Psalm 2:11
- Psalm 37:4
- Psalm 97:12
- Philippians 4:4

Have you ever had the thought, *My heart is just not engaged in the worship of God—and I don't want to be a hypocrite—so I'm just going to wait until my heart is in it before I worship God?* There are a number of things wrong with this kind of thinking (we might just wait our whole lives before we worship God!), but it begs the question—what can you do if your heart is not engaged? How can we regain hearts that are awakened to delight in God?

Worship with our Life

Ultimately, God wants worship that is not just internal (mind and heart), but the kind that gets fleshed out externally in our lives.

Read Romans 12:1.

What is the reason Paul urges us to worship God?

What are we told to offer as our spiritual¹ act of worship? What does this mean for you? Get specific!

Worship in Song

So often today we speak of times of *worship* and really mean music or singing. Obviously, worship is a much larger category than just what we do when we sing. As we've just seen in Romans 12, what God wants is worship that is lived out. Nevertheless, we are exhorted time and again in God's word to respond to his goodness with singing!

- Psalm 32:11
- Psalm 68:4
- Psalm 105:2
- Colossians 3:16

What are some of your favorite songs that feed your mind and your heart with truths about God or allow you to respond in praise to God?

Bring a copy of the songs if you can and sing them together!

Suggestion for Prayer this week in your homegroup:

Use the words of the songs or Psalm 103 as a diving off point for prayer. Remember the character and works of God and devote yourselves to respond in a reasonable way!

¹ The Greek word that the NIV renders "spiritual" is *logikos*. Perhaps a better rendering of this word is "reasonable" or *logical*. God did not just think nice thoughts about us. He did not just decide to forgive us *in his heart*. He came in a body and offered himself for us. Yes, the only logical response is for us to offer ourselves bodily back to him!

Study Seven

Enter His Courts with Thanksgiving

When Italian actor Robert Benigni accepted an Oscar for his performance in *Life is Beautiful*, he gushed and laughed and thanked, and thanked—and thanked... As the audience began to laugh along with him he said, *It's a sign of mediocrity when you demonstrate gratitude with moderation.* The writer of the Psalms would most likely agree.

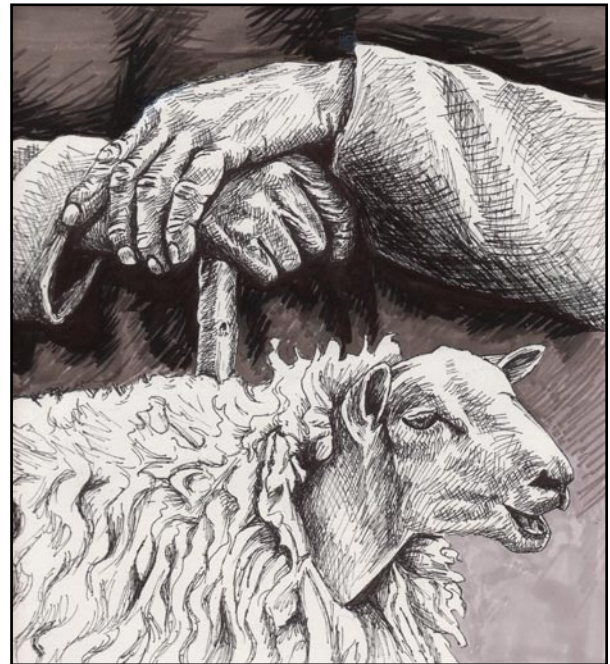
The Book of Psalms is an emotional book. And it is an excellent guidebook for giving thanks in all circumstances. Read Psalm 100, below, and then read it again *out loud*. (If you're having a bad day, you may need to read it a third time, with emphasis!)

*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!
Serve the LORD with gladness!
Come into his presence with singing!*

*Know that the LORD, he is God!
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name!*

*For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.*



In this Psalm, we see directives (things we are to do), and the reasons behind those directives. List them below:

Directives

Reasons

A directive is a simple command that offers no conditional excuses. In other words, we are to do it whether we feel like it or not.¹ In the case of Psalm 100 we are told to praise God with *thankfulness*. Does this feel hypocritical to you? Why or why not?

Respond to the quote below by Viktor Frankl, holocaust survivor:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.²

To choose an attitude of thanksgiving is to live a life characterized by hope. We know that our current circumstances aren't the sum total of what our future holds. Again and again, the Psalms express every range of emotion—grief, fear, envy, anger, joy, confidence. What is notable throughout is the *chosen attitude* of thanksgiving.

Virginia Stem Owen says, *Thanksgiving is not the result of perception; thanksgiving is the access to perception.*³ What does this mean to you? Can you point to a time in your life that illustrates this? Share with your group.

The Message paraphrases v. 4 this way: *Enter with the password: "Thank you!"* Ben Patterson says of this Psalm, *The way into the presence of God is to give praise and thanks.*⁴

Again, we are looking at thankfulness not as an emotion, but as a directive. What might the *discipline* of thanksgiving look like? Give practical examples of ways you can implement this discipline into your life every day.

1 Humphrey Bogart once defined a professional as someone who did a better job when he didn't feel like it.

2 Quoted in *Radical Gratitude*, by Ellen Vaughn, Zondervan, 2005, p. 53.

3 Virginia Stem Owens, *And the Trees Clap Their Hands*, Erdmans, 1983. (Emphasis added.)

4 Ben Patterson, *God's Prayer Book: the Power and Pleasure of Praying the Psalms*, Tyndale 2008, p. 239.

Read Psalm 13. What are the psalmist's¹ current circumstances?

What is the pivotal verse? Have his prayers been answered? On what does the psalmist place his hope?

Throughout Scripture God *commands* our thanks.² Why? God certainly doesn't *need* our thanks, so why does he command it? God commands our thanks because he loves us! That's right—because he loves us. He knows that we need to say *thank you* in order to develop *heartfelt gratitude*. That gratitude, in turn, makes us hopelessly susceptible to joy, and with joy we can't help but live lives of *hope*. And our hope is in the risen Christ. As a parent lifts their child's chin to look up to the person they need to thank, God commands our thanks, so that we may direct our attention to Him, the one who loves us eternally!

Rather than study/discuss more on thanksgiving, take some time (on your own), to set some goals for yourself to incorporate thanks into your daily life.

As you gather in your groups, take extra time to pray through Psalm 100, and celebrate God's power and love!

Bonus quote:

Thanksgiving was another element of which Christ's prayers were full. It was often praise and gratitude that drove him to his knees. Never did there creep into his prayers that note of aggrieved, protesting querulousness which sometimes marks our own. Always it was the amazing goodness of God his Father that filled and flooded his soul. And it was not only life's sunshine splendors that brought the cry of thanksgiving to his lips; the darkness found his gratitude unquenched. He took the broken bread, symbol of his broken body, and gave God thanks. He took the cup, seeing his own blood in it, and gave God thanks. He went out from the upper room to the sweat and agony of Gethsemane, singing a hymn and giving God thanks. In the darkness as in the light praise was the dominant note of Jesus' prayers, and not the Cross itself could silence it.³

1 We know that this Psalm was written by David.

2 Children rarely make it through childhood without being asked (repeatedly) by a parent, *Did you say thank you?* It's a social nicety to be sure, but it is also a slow shaping of their characters.

3 James Stewart, *The Life and Teachings of Jesus*, Abington Press, Nashville.

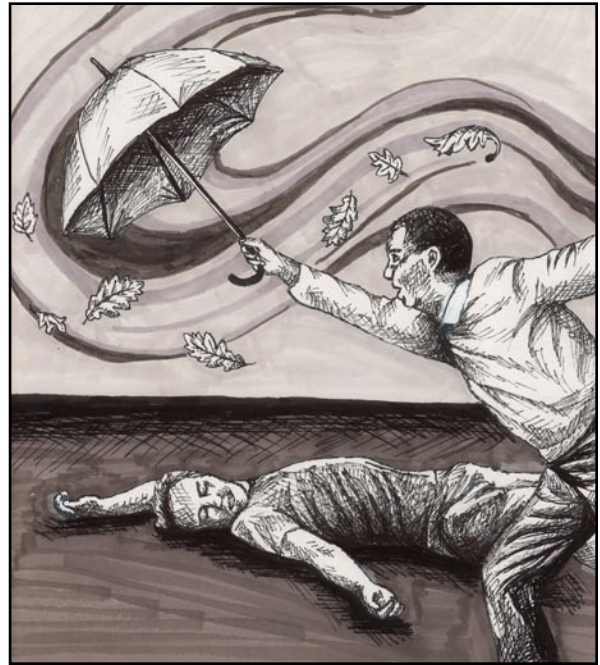
Sermon Notes:

Study Eight

Meaninglessness vs. the Fear of the Lord

The world will lament you for an hour and forget you forever. –Mark Twain

This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Ecclesiastes 9:3-5



Nestled in your Bible, right after the Psalms and the Proverbs, is a little book called Ecclesiastes. The book is 12 chapters long (222 verses) and takes probably 30-40 minutes to read. Most of the time it sounds like an autobiographical sermon of a disgruntled, old, yet successful man. The author speaks from the perspective of someone who lived life to the fullest, a king who enjoyed success, pleasure, wisdom, wealth and luxury and found it all empty.

Ecclesiastes is both haunting and maddening. The reader resonates with the preacher even as he asks, *Why is this book in the Bible?* In many of these verses the we are shocked to find the absence of an answer to life's deepest questions. As Old Testament scholar Walter Harrelson points out,

A crashing destruction of idols, of easy answers to the question of life's meaning—including religious answers—sounds throughout this book.

Barry Webb suggests that Ecclesiastes is perhaps the most enigmatic book in the Old Testament.

Like the desert Sphinx, it teases us with questions, yields its secrets only grudgingly, and will not allow us the luxury of easy answers. In other words it is thoroughly irritating, but at the same time almost mesmerizing in its appeal. It draws us towards it by mirroring the perplexity we all feel as we grapple with life.¹

¹ Barry Webb, *Five Festive Garments*, 2000, IVP, p. 83.

Before going on in this study guide jump into the book itself. Read the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes. If possible, read them slowly and aloud. Make a few notes, mental and with your pencil, describing the state of the writer's soul. Jot down a few thoughts as to your own personal reaction to these chapters. Do you find yourself in these verses, or do you feel like you are reading someone else's mail?

Meaninglessness vs. the Fear of the Lord

Now that we have sampled Ecclesiastes let's look a bit deeper into the book.

Some think the book was authored by Solomon late in his life. He was rich, wise, had an abundance of wives and pursued the pleasures of Jerusalem throughout his reign as king. Those that see this book as basically a spiritual autobiography by Solomon say that this is the *other side* of Proverbs. The former book was mostly written by a young Solomon, optimistic and hopeful about life, while Ecclesiastes is written by an old Solomon, cynical and bitter about the lack of fulfillment he has experienced.

Others see the book as a literary piece, describing someone *like* Solomon, a king who had everything the world could offer and found it wanting.

Ecclesiastes never mentions Solomon by name. The main character in this book is the *Preacher* (ESV), or the *Teacher* (NIV), or the *Quester* (Message). The Hebrew term used is *Qoheleth*¹, and some say we should leave the term untranslated in our English Bibles. In any event, Qoheleth is the voice of Ecclesiastes. The Teacher gives us a sermon on wisdom unlike any we have ever heard or read.

The Teacher's favorite word is *hebel*². The term shows up thirty-eight times in the book and is translated in various ways:

Vanity (ESV)
 Meaningless (NIV)
 Emptiness (NEB)

The term connotes what is visible or recognizable, but unsubstantial, momentary, and profitless.³ How does the Preacher structure his sermon?

1 Pronounced *Ko-helleth*, or, *Ko-hellet*. The title Ecclesiastes comes from the Greek translation of this Hebrew term.

2 Pronounced *he-vell*.

3 Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, 1980, John Knox Press, p. 123.

As we shall see when we study the Song of Songs (study 13), the Hebrews didn't think and write as modern Western people do. Instead of a linear sermon with a beginning, middle and conclusion, this sermon moves through several cycles that all make the same point.

So what is the point of the book? The point is that nothing *under the sun*, the Teacher's word for life on earth lived without reference to God, has enough meaning in itself to satisfy the deepest longings of our soul. Life is temporary, nothing lasts forever. Evil appears to go unchecked. Accordingly everything is scrutinized by the Preacher. Wisdom, work, the pursuit of pleasure, wealth, honor and self-indulgence all come under the critical magnifying glass of the Preacher.

An outline of the cycles of the sermon will help us as we read this beguiling book of the Bible.

1. A Critique of Life: Chapters 1—2

Life grinds to nothingness, but man keeps searching (1:1-11).
Intellectualism, hedonism, materialism (1:12-2:11).
Although wisdom is better, all still die (2:12-16).
Thus he despaired (2:17-23).
Conclusion: Apart from God, there can be no life.
Man in himself cannot find meaning (2:24-26)

2. A Critique of Belief and of Life with God: 3:1-15

He decrees pain as well as pleasure (3:1-11).
So enjoy the moment now (3:12-15)

3. The Conflicts of Belief: 3:16—4:16

Inequity, oppression, rivalry, materialism, and popularity.

4. Be Cautious about Impertinence toward God: 5:1-7

Be careful how you approach, speak to, and "bargain with" our mysterious God.

5. Be Correct in Perspective: 5:8—7:29

Wealth: Don't be deceived when the wicked increase; wealth won't satisfy (5:8—6:12).
Adversity: Hard times are not bad; they shape us (7:1-14)
Yourself: Be humble; you can't know all things (7:15-29)

6. Be Courageous in Life: 8:1—12:14

Be bold in doing right even if you're not rewarded (8:1—10:20)
Be bold in living even though you can't control all things (11:1-6)
Be bold in enjoying life although death will come (11:7—12:8)

9. A Creedal Statement: 12:9-14

God has revealed himself to us through His Word.¹

¹ This outline is from Tommy Nelson, *A Life Well Lived: A Study of the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 2002, B & H Books, p. 7.

Tommy Nelson makes some sense of Ecclesiastes when he says, the Preacher

. . . ends every section with answers for the questions he has raised. As a matter of fact, Solomon gives the same basic answer seven times. It's a troubling answer, but it's also a simple one. Believe it or not, seven times the answer is to have fun and enjoy the life that God has given. (Nelson, p. 6)

Some Questions for Discussion on chapters 1-2:

1:2-11 Summarize the critique the Preacher makes of life in these verses. What bothers him the most? Explain your own resonance with these verses. How do you identify with the Preacher?

1:12—2:23 Here we find the Preacher's critique of the pursuit of *wisdom* (1:12-18), the pursuit of *pleasure* (2:1-11), *wise living* (2:12-17) and the emptiness of life's *labors* (2:18-23). Respond to each of these in your own life. Describe how you find yourself in these verses.

Notice the phrase *under the sun*. This is the Preacher's description of life lived without reference to the fear of the Lord. The phrase occurs eight times in these chapters. Consider the four areas of critique mentioned above (wisdom, pleasure, etc.). The Preacher is disgruntled with each. In your homegroup compare notes between the older and the younger people in the room. Do the older people and the younger people share the same perspective on these areas of life? What does this tell us about living under the sun?

2:24-26 Respond to the conclusion to these chapters. What is the Preacher recommending in these verses?

2:25 reads, *[F]or apart from him [God] who can eat or who can have enjoyment.* How does your life reflect this truth?

Sermon Notes:

Study Nine

Life Under the Sun

A man said to the universe:
“Sir I exist!”
“However,” replied the universe,
“The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation.”
—Stephen Crane



The Preacher, as we learned in our last study, is examining life as it is lived *under the sun*.¹ The phrase occurs almost thirty times in this short book. He preaches from the perspective of a person who knows God, but only from a distance. For the Preacher, God is *in heaven* (5:1) and he is on *earth, or, under the sun*. Accordingly, everything seems trivial, meaningless in fact. Whether it is work, play, pleasure, the quest for justice, or even the desire for friends, life *under the sun* falls short again and again. Kidner explains,

We face [in Ecclesiastes] the appalling inference that nothing has meaning, nothing matters under the sun. It is then that we can hear, as the good news which it is, that everything matters—for God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.²

Everything is meaningless, but not always. The Preacher vacillates between pessimism and optimism.

At times the Preacher seems to be gloomy, pessimistic, a skeleton at the feast; everything comes under his lashing scorn: laughter, drink, possessions, sex, work, wisdom, riches, honour, children, even righteousness. Yet, at other points he urges that we should enjoy life, that there is nothing better than to eat well, enjoy our labour, receive with gladness the riches God gives us but be content if he gives none. A man, he says, should seek wisdom and knowledge, drink his wine with a merry heart, and live joyfully with the wife whom he loves.³

1 Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance: Ecclesiastes and the Way of the World*, 1976, IVP, p. 20. The Preacher will also use the phrases *under heaven*, and *on earth* as alternatives to *under the sun*.
2 12:14. It is on this note that the whole book/sermon ends.
3 Michael Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 1983, p. 36.

Again, let's be careful that we study Ecclesiastes itself and not this study guide. Read Ecclesiastes 3—6. The book is a literary masterpiece. Savor the Preacher's use of language, his cadence and vocabulary. Read slowly, and aloud if possible. Try to read these chapters as if you are hearing a somber sermon.

Make some notes as you read. What are the areas of complaint that you find in the Preacher's sermon? Do you share these complaints in your own life? What questions does your reading provoke in your mind?

Write your own description of the Preacher's under the sun viewpoint. What would a present-day equivalent be to this phrase?

How do you relate to this viewpoint? Does it express your perspective on life? Explain.

3:1-8 is one of the more famous sections of Ecclesiastes. These words are recited at funerals and at weddings. Pete Seeger put these verses to song in the late 1950s and his tune was popularized by the Byrds in the mid 1960s. What is the Preacher doing in these verses? What does he wish to communicate? The verses are best understood in relation to what comes before and after (see chart below). Look again at these verses in context. What do you think is the author's point?

2:24-26

Living life from the perspective of God's presence.



3:1-8

Living through the inevitable seasons of life.



3:9-15

Living life from the perspective of God's presence.

With the above in mind, do you think the Preacher is being primarily optimistic or pessimistic in 3:1-8? Are these verses a part of the Preacher's despair? Does he feel imprisoned by the sequence of the seasons? Or are these poetic lyrics a part of the Preacher's hope?

What emotions do these verses evoke in you as you ponder them?

In these chapters the Preacher expresses significant disappointment (and sometimes satisfaction) in much that life has to offer. Examine the following areas and reflect on them from the perspective of your own life. Discuss these as a homegroup.

- Friendship (4:7-12)
- Justice (3:16-17; 4:1-3; 5:8-9)
- Work (3:9-13; 3:22; 4:6)
- Life itself (3:19-21; 4:4-5; 4:13-16)

- God (3:14-15; 5:1-7)

- Money (5:10—6:6)

Any look at Ecclesiastes, no matter how brief, would be amiss if it didn't include the final words of the Preacher. Read Ecclesiastes 12:13-14. How does this help make sense of the entire book?

Sermon Notes:

Study Ten

Wisdom and Suffering

Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised. Job 1:21

The problem of suffering and the sovereignty of God is a problem as old as the ages. If God is all good and absolutely sovereign over the universe, why then do innocent people suffer calamity? Why tsunami waves, hurricanes and earth quakes? Some philosophers have tipped the scales saying that since innocent people suffer because God is not all good, because God has a dark side. Others say that since there is so much indiscriminate suffering, and since God is all-good, He must



be unable to stop suffering. Eastern religions (Hinduism, Buddhism) claim that what appears to be indiscriminate suffering is really retribution for sins committed in another life. The law of karma is at work when people suffer.

The book of Job will pursue none of these courses. Instead, the author takes the reader on a startling, though leisurely, tour of one man's tribulation, grief, questioning and finally to God's response to Job's problem of evil and suffering.

Job. He was rich and righteous, blameless and upright. Job feared God and turned away from evil. And yet he suffered greatly. Sometimes people suffer because of their unrighteousness, because of their sinful choices. But Job suffers because of his righteousness. The story of Job

is confounding, troubling, thoughtful and mysterious. Throughout, this piece of wisdom literature points us to God and to his sovereignty. But the author of the book will not provide the reader with any easy answers to the question of why the innocent suffer. Readers of the this book are generally left with their questions even as they are encouraged to trust in the God who both allows and sometimes ordains that we walk in the valley of the shadow of death.

Before going on in this study get in to the book itself. Read Job 1-3. Read it slowly and, if possible, aloud. Make a list of the main characters. What do we learn about Job himself in these chapters? What phrases and words stand out to you? Share these details with your homegroup.

Main Characters

Personality of Job

The structure of the book of Job is startling. Job is famous for his trials, yet we read of all of Job's calamities in a mere eight verses (1:13-19; 2:7). These calamities, only described briefly, are the backdrop for the entire book. Job is a long book, 42 chapters made up of 1070 verses, and its outline is odd.¹ The book falls into three very unbalanced thirds.

- 1:1—2:10** Prologue: Job suffers at the hand of God
- 2:11—42:6** Body: Job converses with his friends and with God
- 42:7-17** Conclusion: Job is restored

1:1-5 Consider the first half of chapter one. What does the reader know that Job doesn't know?

1:1-12 What indications do we have that Job was righteous?

One possible answer to the problem of Job's sufferings is to place the book in a broad theological context and say, *Job received what we all deserve. We are all sinful and all deserve nothing but the wrath of God.* We could cite Romans 1:18ff. for example, and rest in God's just and proportionate dispensing of his righteous indignation.

But the book of Job itself won't allow such cross-referencing. From the perspective of the writer, Job is innocent. He is *blameless not sinless*. Meaning the pattern of Job's life was in concert with God's will for him. God himself calls Job *blameless and upright* (1:8). In the Bible, generally, a person reaps what he sows in this life (see the book of Proverbs²). But Job is the exception to the rule.

Notice the taunt behind the testing of Job. Satan says to God, in effect, *Surely Job follows you for the blessings he has received. Take away those blessings and he will curse you to your face* (1:9-11).

¹ Literarily Job is unique, not only to the Bible but also to ancient Near Eastern literature. The book of Job is an astonishing mixture of almost every kind of literature to be found in the Old Testament. Many individual pieces can be isolated and identified as proverbs, riddles, hymns, laments, curses, lyrical nature poems. (Andersen, p. 33)

² See also Galatians 6:7; Psalms 34:11-22; 1 Peter 3:10.

Think about your own life. Have you experienced much suffering in your life? If not, how do you think you would respond if the people and things most precious to you were taken away? Reflect on this together as a homegroup.

1:20 may be the most spectacular verse in this book. Job loses everything but his health and his wife and his response is to worship God. Why do you think he did this? What do you think this means? How do you envision this worship?

Have you had a similar experience of suffering leading to worship in your life? If so, share this with your homegroup.

Respond to the following quotation.

God sometimes allows, or, dare we say, ordains that we walk in the valley of the shadow, perhaps because it may be that there is no other way of discovering the power of his comforting rod and staff. Or perhaps it is because of some inscrutable providence of his own in which—in all his love and grace, and not in the slightest manipulatively—he calls on us to be his servants through our pains and our frailties within wider purposes in heaven than we on earth can discern.¹

Clearly none of us has suffered as Job did. Yet everyone suffers, and everyone will suffer in this life. What is your response to the way one preacher reflected on the life of Job?

Job suffered more suddenly than perhaps any of us will ever suffer, but in the end he did not suffer more comprehensively than each of us will suffer.²

1 David Atkinson, *The Message of Job: Suffering and Grace*, 1991, IVP, p. 14.

2 Mark Dever, unpublished sermon on Job at Capital Hill Baptist Church, Washington, D.C.

What are your expectations of suffering in this life? How do these expectations shape the way you pursue God in this season of life?

The body of the book of Job consists of lengthy dialogues between Job and three or four of his friends. Finally God steps in and speaks. We will examine this in our next study. But for now, look at Job's initial response to his sufferings (3:3-26). Job's untrammelled sufferings led him to despair. He suffered and had no answer as to why he was suffering. As C. S. Lewis put it in a book about his own grief after his wife's death,

Talk to me about the truth and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion, or I shall suspect that you don't understand.¹

Joni Eareckson Tada became a quadriplegic as a teenager and has been unable to move her hands and feet for most of her life. She has suffered greatly as a consequence of her diving accident that changed her life dramatically. While we don't find much of this in Job, Erickson sees much benefit in suffering. Reflect on the following quotation. Referring to Psalm 119:67 and 71 she writes,

God uses suffering to purge sin from our lives, strengthen our commitment to him, force us to depend on grace, bind us together with other believers, produce discernment, foster sensitivity, discipline our minds, spend our time wisely, stretch our hope, cause us to know Christ better, make us long for the truth, lead us to repentance of sin, teach us to give thanks in times of sorrow, increase faith, and strengthen character.²

In the second half of Job 1:21 Job says, *The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD*. Pray for yourself and for your homegroup that you would develop a spirit of gratitude toward God.

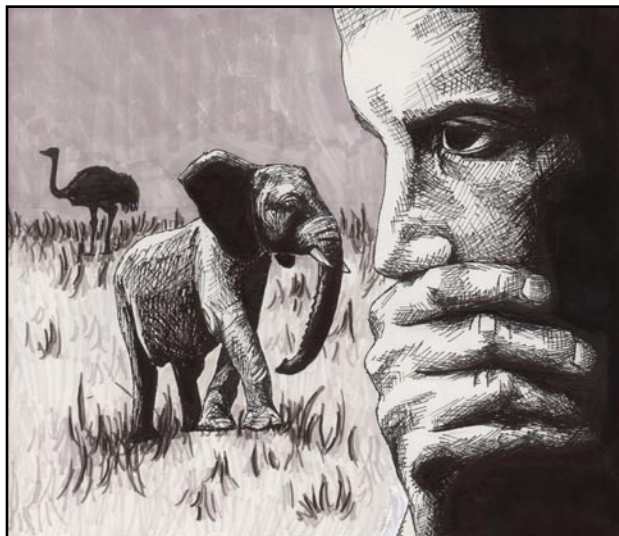
¹ From *A Grief Observed*, p. 23.

² Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes, *When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty*, 1997, p. 117.

Study Eleven

***Wisdom and the Answer of God***

*Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his seat!
I would lay my case before him
and fill my mouth with arguments. . .
Behold, I go forward, but he is not there,
and backward, but I do not perceive him;
on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him;
he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him. Job 23:3-4, 8-9*



Job is a fascinating story insofar as it depicts a man who suffers in faithfulness and righteousness who cries out to God and hears. . . nothing. At least for most of the book. Just when Job needs to hear from the Lord, God is absent. Job experiences what the Psalmist senses in his heart,

*Why, O Lord, do you stand afar off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*
Psalm 10:1

The body of the book of Job is a series of dialogues between Job and three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar). These three think pain and suffering are always a consequence for wrong-doing and they aren't afraid to say so. Their friend is suffering, therefore, they reason, he has done wrong. God's justice is being dispensed, Job is getting what he deserves. In each cycle of conversation Job is steadfast, resolute, defending himself before his friends and before God. Finally a fourth, young, friend (Elihu) speaks and castigates Job's three friends and then goes on to rebuke Job himself.

These dialogues comprise chapters 4-37. They contain some of the most lofty poetry in the Bible and are well worth reading and re-reading. In fact, by skipping to Job 38 in our brief study we risk missing the sustained repetition in the book that prepares the reader for God to speak. If you don't have time to read these chapters, it would be good to take a few minutes and peruse these pages. Look over the chapter headings supplied by the publishers of your translation of the Bible to get a feel for the content of these chapters.

Finally, after all of these dialogues, God speaks. Keeping the following outline in mind, read Job 38-42 before going on in this study. Remember, we want to study the Bible and not study this study guide. Make notes of those things that stand out as you read. Share your reflections with your homegroup.

Outline:

The wisdom of God as seen in his creation (38-39)

Job's response (40:3-4)

The wisdom of God of God as seen in his power (40:5—41:34)

Job's response (42:1-6)

Yahweh's response to Job's friends (42:7-9)

Job's fortunes are restored (42:10-17)

What is striking about these chapters is not in what God says, but in what God doesn't say. We look in vain for an answer to the questions that have haunted Job. God doesn't explain why Job suffered severely. God doesn't address the accusations Job's friends have made in the previous dialogues. God doesn't accuse Job, making a list of Job's sins as his friends have done, nor does God defend Job. God doesn't even explain to Job that he was the object of Satan's test. As far as the reader knows, Job is never told what was behind all of his sufferings. God doesn't apologize to Job, nor does he explain his lengthy silence. Instead the Lord asks Job questions and makes statements of his own power and majesty. In the end, God says, in effect, I am God, and you are not. . . that is all the answer you will get. . .

38:3 What do you think God's intonation is in this verse? What tone of voice is Yahweh using when he says, *I will question you, and you make it known to me*? Is God trying to humiliate Job? Encourage Job? How do you read this verse?

38:4—39:30 almost reads like a tour of the zoo and the mysteries of animal life.

Can you hunt prey for the lioness (38:39)? Who provides for the ravens (38:41)? What about the life-giving power of birth—for the mountain goats (39:1); the wild asses (39:45); the wild oxen (39:9)? (Atkinson, p. 146)

Why do you think God would take Job on such a tour as a partial answer to his questions?

39:13-18 brings us to one of God's jokes—*the ostrich!* Respond to the following. In what ways are you ostrich-like?

The silly bird, flapping her wings proudly but getting nowhere, leaving her eggs in the earth not thinking that someone may step on them (39:15). God did not give her a share of good sense (39:17)! . . . Indeed, the ostrich is almost a picture of Job himself—a paradox, a mixture of strength (39:18) and foolishness (39:13-17). Yet in spite of all its failure to understand, it has a valued place in God's creation. (Atkinson, p. 146)

40:3-5 is one of the more important paragraphs in the whole book. John White wrote a book on some of the people who prayed in the Bible. He includes a chapter on the prayers of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Daniel, Hannah, Paul, Jesus and Job. Building on 40:4 White calls Job *the man who covered his mouth*.¹ God finally makes his appearance and addresses Job directly.

*Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?
He who argues with God, let him answer it. (40:1)*

¹ John White, *Daring to Draw Near*, 1977, p. 97.

White explains.

Suddenly the previous torrent of words seemed pointless, empty. They were redundant, out of place. They could add nothing to what he now saw. Words were as superfluous as some pinhead's typewritten comments about art, Scotch taped to the Pieta, or the Mona Lisa. Job knew as never before that he who meets God does indeed have nothing to say.

Have you ever had an encounter with God where you sensed his presence after a period of questioning and were stunned into silence? If so, share this with your homegroup.

Commentators point out that the common denominator among the animals of chapters 38-39 is that none of them is under human control. The point is that God's creation is not really understood by humankind. If we cannot understand the animals God created, how can we understand God himself?

After the brief response of Job (40:3-5) to God's questions, Yahweh goes on and speaks of two unspecified animals, *Behemoth* (40:15ff.) and *Leviathan* (41:1ff.). In Hebrew Behemoth is the plural for beast, and Leviathan seems *like a dragon with flaming breath and smoke from his nostrils*. (Atkinson, p. 151)

If the animals of 38-39 give Job a vision of God's wisdom, these two creatures point to Yahweh's power.

They embody the inexplicable and the frightening in God's world. Here are two of the mysteries of God. There is a great deal about these two strange creatures which Job does not know and could not control. Here, in your world, Job, are inexplicable, unfathomable and fearful mysteries. Here is a power beyond human power. Before Behemoth and Leviathan, you are powerless. And yet both of these are under the control of God. Even the most fearful and monstrous and powerfully terrible things are held with the Creator's hand. 'Everything under heaven belongs to me' (41:11). (Atkinson, p. 151)

42:2-6 contain Job's last speech. The shocking conclusion of Job is to repent in dust and ashes. At the beginning of the story Job's circumstances change. At the end of the story Job is a changed man. Why does Job repent? What do you think is the relation of our suffering and repentance. Compare Luke 13:1-5 (Read carefully and be forewarned, this is a striking paragraph from the mouth of Jesus!). What experience do you have of coupling grief with repentance?

Francis Andersen provides an apt summary of the point of the whole book. Respond to the following. How do you measure up against Job?

The whole story became a test of both God and Job. Here is the answer to the Satan's cynicism. Here is the proof that Job has clung to God when stripped of all else. Here is the proof that a man can love God simply for being God, not for reward. Here the lack of a formal answer to the moral question, indeed the narrowing of the spotlight of the book to one individual is positively instructive. Job is vindicated in a faith in God's goodness that has survived a terrible deprivation. . . Next to Jesus, Job must surely be the greatest *believer* in the whole Bible. (Andersen, p. 271)

The words of James form an apt summary of the lesson of the book of Job. He calls his original readers, and us, to be patient *until the coming of the Lord*.

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. Job 5:7-11

May it be so in our lives, and may we prove to be faithful until he comes.

Sermon Notes:

Study Twelve

Wisdom and Sex

*Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead.
Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the
washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them has lost its
young.* Song of Songs 4:1b-2

The Song of Songs (Sometimes called *The Song of Solomon*) is the most erotic book of the Bible. It is embarrassingly frank, impossible to understand, very clear, difficult to put down and rarely read by Evangelical Christians. First-time readers of this song are likely to say to themselves, *Hmmm, I never knew this kind of stuff was in the Bible, and then, if married, likely to call out, Honey, come here, you gotta see this! . . . did you know this was in the Bible?*

Song of Songs is very erotic, but not necessarily enticing. The book never mentions God and has no plot. Essentially it is a poem/song (or a collection of poems) celebrating the goodness of sexual love between a man and a woman. In fact, sexual love is seen as a good in itself. In a culture that highly valued the bearing of children and large families, the Song never mentions procreation. If you have never read the Song of Songs buckle your seat belt, you are in for a wild ride and probably a few good laughs.



While the Song of Songs has been an embarrassment to many in the church throughout her history,¹ the Jews revered this book and elevated its importance. Far from being embarrassed by it, Rabbi Akiba, who lived in the first century, said,

For all the world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.

In Israel this Song was read during the worship service on the last day of the Feast of Passover, the greatest of the annual feasts observed by the Jews.

¹ Embarrassed as they were by the sexually frank imagery in the Song of Songs, many in the church attempted to turn these poems into allegories claiming the bride's breasts represented Moses and Aaron, the Old and New Testaments, the church from which we feed, etc. Through the ages these allegorical interpretations have been as ingenious as they have been ridiculous.

Before we turn to the Song itself, let's gain some understanding of what we are going to read. Old Testament scholar Tom Gledhill sees the Song as poetic entertainment, that is,

It is a love-song of haunting beauty and intimacy. The Song found its early popularity within the social and religious life of ancient Israel. It was most probably sung as entertainment at local celebrations of the various harvest festivals, accompanied by dancing at a village wedding, sung as court entertainment at the royal palace in Jerusalem, or at happy family reunions or gatherings.¹

Gledhill goes on to say that the two young lovers in the Song are *rejoicing, on their very own wedding day, in the splendour and magnificence of their own 'royal' occasion.* (Gledhill, p. 23)

So, how shall we read the Song of Songs? The introductory notes to the *Literary Study Bible* are helpful. There we learn that this book is a *small anthology of love lyrics*. The editors see the whole book as a chiasmic² poem and outline the book as follows:

Poetic Fragments: Falling in love 1:1-8
 Love Poems: Courtship Overtones 1:9—2:7
 Wedding Poems: 2:8—5:1
 Love Poems: Marriage Overtones 5:2—7:13
 Poetic Fragments: Falling in love 8:1-14

The main assignment of this study is not to read this study guide but to read the Song of Songs. This Old Testament book is 117 verses long and can easily be read in 20 minutes.

Read this book in its entirety with the above outline in mind (you may have to ignore the outline headings in your own Bible).

Before you read, a word of caution: While the Song is erotic, the imagery is meant to excite our wonder about the gift of marital love, not stimulate our sexual passions inappropriately. We must guard our imaginations as we read. As one commentator puts it, *Readers, like young lovers, have a problem of knowing how far to go.*

¹ Tom Gledhill, *The Message of Song of Songs: The Lyrics of Love*, 1994, IVP, p. 19.

² Chiasm means crossing. Hebrew poets often wrote their songs or poems with a chiasmic structure, that is, the poem was built with a mirror like reflection. ABBA, or ABCDDCBA. Consider, for example, Amos 5:4-5:

Seek me and live; a
 but do not seek **Bethel**, b
 and do not enter into **Gilgal** c
 or cross over to Beer-sheba; d
 Gilgal will surely go into exile, c
 and **Bethel** shall come to nought. b
Seek the LORD and live, a

Once a particular line of interpretation has been suggested, it is difficult to avoid seeing explicit sexual allusions everywhere, until the whole work becomes . . . saturated in references to genitalia, intercourse and explicit sex. That the Song is about sexual love is not disputed. But that must be seen in its widest context, for love between the sexes is more than physical expression; the lovers in the Song interact in many other ways, praising each other, going out in the country together, just quietly being in each other's presence. Their mutual commitment is not just for the purpose of physical pleasure. (Gledhill, p. 30)

Read these 117 verses. Make a list of the surprises you find in this very unusual book of the Bible. Discuss these as a group.

What does this book teach us about God? If we begin with the belief that this book is both inspired by God and that God intended these poems to be in the Bible, what does that tell us about our Lord?

Now consider the same question in light the frequent assumption in the Bible that our relation to God is much like a wife's relationship to her husband. As Kinlaw writes,

The use of the marriage metaphor to describe the relationship of God to his people is almost universal in Scripture. From the time that God chose Israel to be his own in the Sinai Desert, the covenant was pictured in terms of a marriage. (Kinlaw, p. 1280)

- In this context, to worship false gods was the equivalent of spiritual adultery (Exodus 34:10-17).
- The very land of Israel was to be seen as the bride of Yahweh (Isaiah 62:4ff.).
- Jeremiah mourns that Israel broke her marriage vows to her husband Yahweh (Jeremiah 31:32).
- Hosea looked forward to a time of spiritual renewal when Israel would again call Yahweh my husband (Hosea 2:16-19).
- In the New Testament, Paul explicitly sees the church as the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-23) and John portrays the end of history as a wedding banquet between the church and her husband Jesus (Revelation 19:9).

How do the above verses inform your understanding of the Song of Songs?

If the Song of Songs extols the virtues of marital intimacy, many passages in both Testaments warn against the promiscuous use of sex outside of marriage. Compare 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-20. What do these passages teach about sexual practice? Do you find any tension with the Song of Songs in these passages?

In his classic work *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes,

Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. There is no getting away from it: the old Christ rule is, "Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence."

The above two Bible passages speak to this standard believers are to abide by. Even in the Song of Songs we find this principle. Three times we read,

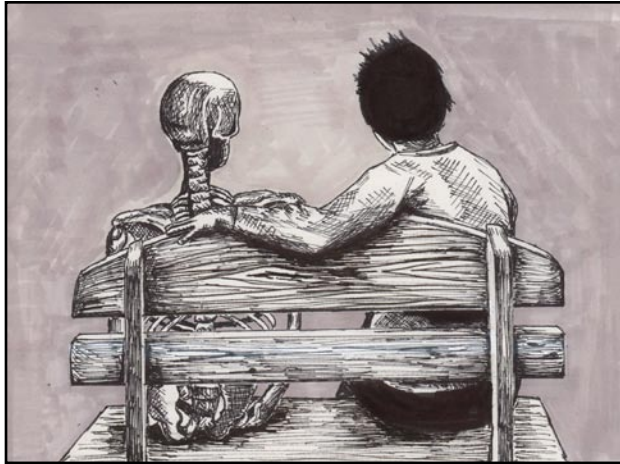
I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases. (Song of Songs 2:7; 3:5; 8:4)

Gledhill explains.

She wants their love to be consummated, but she is in great tension, because she knows that the time is not yet ripe. In speaking to the daughters of Jerusalem, she is speaking to herself. She is basically telling herself to cool it, to wait for the appropriate time. For the Christian, the appropriate time is always within marriage, never outside it. (Gledhill, p. 129)

How can the church proclaim a healthy, biblical understanding of the gift of sexual intimacy without mirroring the world's preoccupation with the sex act?

How can the church proclaim a healthy, biblical understanding of the gift of sexual intimacy without provoking the unmarried to temptation and jealousy or elevating the status of married persons over those who are single?



Study Thirteen
Wisdom and the Challenge of Homosexuality

The wisdom books of Proverbs and Song of Songs both have a great deal to say about wise sexual living. Song of Songs is an almost embarrassing description of and invitation to marital love. Don't let your kids read it unless you're ready to answer a lot of questions! Proverbs is full of advice from a loving father who is trying to protect his son from sexual stupidity.

He wants to impart Godly wisdom about how to live sexually and warns him that if he is sexually immoral he will be reduced to a *loaf of bread*. (Proverbs 6:26)

The Old Testament wisdom literature, and the books of Proverbs and Song of Songs in particular, do not speak specifically about homosexual behavior. In this, our last study in the *Way of the Wise* series we are going to broaden our approach to wise living and look outside of the wisdom literature to examine the issue of homosexual behavior by looking at a variety of Old and New Testament passages.

The debate in our culture over homosexuality and the right to marry is as contentious as any social issue of our time. It is not going away. Christians and the church are often the target of scorn by the gay community and progressive secularists. As this study guide is being written (April 09) one of the key news stories of the week, garnering more than its fair share of air-time, concerns the Miss USA Beauty Pageant. At the center of the storm is Carrie Prejean, Miss California, and an outspoken Christian who attends a Christian college in San Diego. She was asked by judge Perez Hilton, a homosexual, what she thought about legalizing gay marriage. She answered, *I believe that marriage should be between and man and a woman*. Immediately the bloggers lit up, pundits on news shows weighed in and everyone from Oprah to Donald Trump wanted to share their opinion.

The state of California is in the midst of a contentious debate over gay marriage. Proposition 8 was a California ballot proposition passed in the November 4, 2008, general election. It changed the state Constitution by specifying that marriage is between a man and a woman. The two sides combined poured over 90 million dollars into the election. The outcry has been acrimonious to say the least. Rick Warren's church (*America's pastor*) was picketed for days and Christians in particular were maligned by those in favor of same-sex marriage. We can expect more ballot measures on this issue in future elections.

Let's begin by exploring some Old Testament passages that speak of homosexual behavior. As you ponder these Scriptures remember that they were written to Israel. It is important to remember that Israel was a theocratic (ruled by God) Kingdom and should not be confused with a modern Western democracy.

What does Genesis 19:1-13 teach about homosexual behavior? For added insight read Jude 7.

Leviticus 18 is long list of sexual practices that were prohibited for Israel to participate in. In reading this list we are reminded that the Bible is never prudish about naming sin. Focus on 18:22. What does this verse say?

How does 18:22 fit in with the rest of this very explicit chapter? Is homosexual sin unique from other sexual sins?

Leviticus 20 is another long chapter loaded with sexual prohibitions for God's people. What is unique about this chapter is the punishments that were to be administered when these practices were committed. Focus on 20:13. What is the punishment for this sin? Is this different than the punishment for the other sexual sins listed in chapter 20? What does this teach you?

Biblical scholars make the point that the sexual sins listed in Leviticus 18 & 20 were commonplace among the nations and people groups that surrounded Israel. God is making it clear that his people are to have a sexual lifestyle that is distinct from the people around them.

You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD. Leviticus 18:2-5

Fast forward to California in 2009. What sorts of sexual practices does our culture either overtly accept or casually approve that the Bible condemns?

Read Romans 1:18-32. Commentators are in agreement that Paul is describing idolatrous pagans in the Greco-Roman world of his day. These people had a certain knowledge of God through the created universe (vv. 19-20) and a moral sense and an understanding of the judgment of God (v. 32), yet they suppressed the truth in order to practice wickedness. Instead of worshipping God they turned to idols, confusing the Creator with his creatures.

What is the judgment that God gives to the people described in Romans 1:18-32?

What is the main point of this passage? Is Paul's concern homosexual behavior or idolatry? What is the relationship between the two?

Thomas Schmidt has written one of the better Christian books on this subject, *Straight & Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexual Debate*. Respond to his summary statement on Romans 1:18-32.

Homosexual behavior is “revolting” not because heterosexuals find it so—they have their own dirt to deal with (2:22)—but because it epitomizes in sexual terms the revolt against God. It is sinful because it violates the plan of God, present from creation, for the union of male and female in marriage. (p. 85)

Try to summarize Paul's argument in Romans 1:18-32. How does this help you think through the problem of homosexual activity?

Our last two passages are an ugly list of sins that Paul says are incompatible with following Jesus and living this new Kingdom life. What strikes you about these two lists? Where do you find yourself in these lists? What do we learn about homosexual activity from these passages?

- 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

- 1 Timothy 1:8-11

You have now looked at the five main biblical references to homosexual behavior. Because there are only these five main passages in the Bible that address homosexual activity should we conclude that the topic is marginal to the main thrust of the Bible and not that important?

Try and think about how you would hear these five passages if you were struggling with same sex desire or were actively engaged in a homosexual lifestyle.

You may have noticed that to this point in this study that we have left out a key component in considering homosexuality. The opening chapters of Genesis offer clues to God's intention for humanity and sexuality from the beginning. The Bible does not begin with a list of prohibited sexual activities but rather with the beauty of heterosexual marriage. Read Genesis 1:27-28, 2:18, and 2:23-24. What affirmations do you find about sex, reproduction, male—female relationships, and marriage in these verses?

These creation texts in Genesis should be a foundation for any further reflection on human sexuality. The other New Testament passages we considered at the beginning of this study present homosexual practice as a violation of marriage and as an activity very similar to adultery. Respond to the following by Thomas Schmidt, *Every sexual act that the Bible calls sin is essentially a violation of marriage whether existing or potential*. (Schmidt, p. 53)

It is not enough to leave this discussion at the theoretical level. This thorny issue is one that the church of Jesus must deal with in the everyday world. Let's think practically together.

Do you have any friends who are either actively living a homosexual life or struggling with same sex-desire? How has this affected how you think about this issue?

An increasing number of people in our culture no longer see sexual preference as a moral issue but as a civil rights issue. The contentious debate over proposition 8 would be a good example. At the heart of this question is the nurture-nature issue. Is homosexual preference something you are, like being female, or elderly or black or white, or is it something you do, like adultery, or polygamy or watch pornography? In our culture public acceptance of homosexual behavior is on the increase because many people believe that same-sex desire is biologically driven. How would you as a Bible believing Christian respond to this dilemma?

Some in the Christian community (and outside the Christian community) have a personal hostility toward homosexuals that is often expressed with an open hatred. Recently the Los Angeles Times ran an article about campus protests at Los Angeles City College. A handful of Christians showed up with signs reading, God hates Gays. (Anti-gay-marriage speech agitates L.A. City College, 3/3/09). It is doubtful that the non-believing homosexuals who saw these signs will be showing up at church on Sunday to hear about God's love. How can SBCC remain faithful to the teaching of the Bible on homosexual activity, and yet be a safe and inviting place for those in a homosexual life-style who need to hear of God's love and forgiveness?

John Stott comments that homophobia is a mixture of irrational fear, hatred, and even revulsion. He goes on to cite church historian Richard Lovelace who calls for a *double repentance, namely, that gay Christians renounce their active life-style and that straight Christians renounce homophobia*. How do you need to repent? (Stott, *Involvement: Social and Sexual Relationships in the Modern World*, p. 243)

This study has given us a lot to think about. Try to wrap up all these Scripture passages and your thoughts about the sexual practices of our world today. How can you and how can SBCC be a more faithful witness to the love and forgiveness found in Jesus as relates homosexual behavior? What changes will you make in your life because of this study?

Sermon Notes:

Study Fourteen

Wisdom and Earth Stewardship

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. Psalm 19:1-2

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him. Psalm 24:1



It is difficult to get through a week without hearing of, reading about or participating in some sort of Green activity. Environmental concerns are everywhere. Issues range from highly polarizing arguments of climate change to reusable coffee mugs. The current popularity has driven the green movement from a fringe matter for hippies and obscure scientists to Madison Avenue marketing and political campaigns. And while the hype around the green movement makes it seem extremely important, just how important is it to God? If caring for the environment is something that God deems important, how should we as Christians respond?

The issues are complex and the contemporary debate is often fueled by misinformation,

misconceptions, prior commitments and political allegiances. The discussion for Christians becomes even more problematic when opinions about particular issues such as, logging, pollution standards for our air and water, global warming, the endangered species act, population growth, dams, off road vehicles, and alternative energy are formed independently of a biblical world view. What is a Christian to think of all this?

Read the following Psalms. What do they tell us about the world that God has made? Does the natural world of sky, trees, birds, rivers, oceans and mountains have any intrinsic value in itself? What help do you get from these Psalms in thinking through this issue of the Christian's stewardship of the earth?

- Psalm 19:1-6
- Psalm 24:1-2
- Psalm 36:5-6

- Psalm 104:10-18
- Psalm 148:1-5

Read the creation account in Genesis chapters 1-2. This foundational portion of Scripture is both simple and complex. While there is much to talk about in these opening two chapters of the Bible, read these chapters asking yourself the following questions:

How does God feel about his creation?

What is the relationship that man and woman are to have to the created order?

In what ways are Adam and Eve distinct from the plants and animals?

The current ecological crisis in our world is often blamed on Christians and a Christian worldview that has supposedly interpreted the opening chapters of Genesis in a manner that has led to the destruction of our environment. In Genesis 1-2 we find three crucial phrases; *dominion*, *subdue*, and *till* and *keep*. How we understand and apply these words will have a tremendous effect on our stewardship of the earth.

Dominion (rule)

In Genesis 1:26, 28 we find two occurrences of this controversial word. The Hebrew word is *radah*, which means to govern, rule or have dominion. The New Living Bible renders the word *masters*. The NIV and NASB translate it as *rule*. Most commentators understand subdue as a word that merely extends and amplifies the task of *dominion*.

British scholar, preacher and author John Stott draws three conclusions from these verses (*Involvement*, Vol. 1 p. 155)

1. God gave man dominion over the earth. We bear the image of God and we wield dominion over the earth and its creatures. Indeed, our unique dominion over the earth is due to our unique relationship to God.
2. Our dominion is cooperative. In exercising our God-given dominion, we are not creating the processes of nature, but cooperating with them.
3. Our dominion is delegated, and therefore a responsible dominion. The earth does not belong to us by right, but only by favour. The earth 'belongs' to us not because we made or own it, but because it's Maker has entrusted its care to us.

Think about this word *dominion* or *rule*. How could the concept of dominion be misused by Christians in relationship to the environment? Can you give any examples?

How do John Stott's comments above help us to think about Biblical dominion and stewardship of the earth?

Genesis 2:15 says, *The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to till and keep it*. The garden can be seen as a metaphor for the earth. The word translated *till* is from the Hebrew word *abad* which can be translated, *to work, to serve, to be a slave to*. *Shamar* is the Hebrew word translated as *keep* in our text. It could also be rendered *watch*, or *preserve*. The NIV translates it, *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it*. What would it look like for God's people to *till and keep the garden*? How could this verse be twisted to suit various agendas and positions on the environment?

When you begin to talk about the beauty and sanctity of the natural world some Christians begin to get uneasy and wonder if you are about to begin worshipping nature. There is good reason for this concern. Many in our culture, particularly those who have been influenced by New Age thought forms, come close to worshipping nature or have actually crossed that line.¹ In Paul's words, *They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator*. (Romans 1:25) Christians do not worship nature but rather the God who is distinct from nature and created our world. But it is this very beauty of the created order that reflects the glory and goodness of the Creator.

¹ *Gaia* is the Greek earth goddess. In recent years there has been a great deal of talk about the *Gaia theory* by New Age devotees, neo-pagans, eco-feminists, deep environmentalists, and some animal rights activists. Essentially the theory postulates that the Earth is a living creature implying a kind of mystical divine power to Earth. Distinctions between the planet, people and animals are blurred. In this world view a tree, a baby and a raccoon may all have equal value.

We can tend to think of Christian stewardship of the earth primarily in terms of our immediate context: the Coastal Commission, SUVs, recycling, wetlands, etc. The most acute crisis environmentally, however, is in the developing world. Dr. Paul Brand, the famous medical missionary who has spent his life treating lepers in India comments that, *The world will die from lack of soil and pure water long before it will die from lack of antibiotics or surgical skill and knowledge.* How can we be involved in earth stewardship outside of our immediate context?

In what sense is the stewardship of our water, air, and soil a justice issue as relates to the poor?

When thinking about our stewardship of the earth we must always remember that the biblical understanding of our world includes a profound sense of the sinfulness of humanity. Sin is selfish. Sin is greedy. Sin is shortsighted. Sin is destructive. John Stott puts it like this; *At the root of the ecological crisis is human greed, what has been called 'economic gain by environmental loss.'* (Stott, *Involvement* Vol. 1, p, 165) The Christian understands this and sees that behind polluted drinking water, habitat destruction and the dumping of toxic waste is greedy sinful people. How have you seen sin play out in the destruction of our environment? Can you think of ways that your own selfishness and greed have affected your stewardship of our world?

Because of sin many people will do whatever it takes, regardless of who or what is destroyed, to earn another dollar. Christians should not be surprised when the local landowner or multinational corporation conducts business in a way that is harmful to the environment. As Christians we want to bring a biblical worldview to bear on all of life. So Christians are people who agitate, write letters, vote and most importantly pray. Hopefully we are bringing our faith to bear on public issues like abortion, social justice, world hunger and poverty, pornography, racial relations and the environment. What are some of the ways that the Christian can be *salt and light* in this area of the stewardship of the earth?

In what ways is it wise for Christians to care for our world as stewards of what God has created?

Ponder and respond to the quotations below.

From time to time I wonder why there is so little cross fertilization between the people who love mountains and birds and trees and the people who pray to the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. How did we get separated into these two camps, the creation people and the Christ people? There is no disconnection in our biblical revelation, no division between creation and Christ, no separation in the evangelical gospel between heaven and earth.
—Eugene Peterson

The overall thrust of the Biblical message is one of hope for the material creation, which was lovingly made to show the character of God and intended as an enduring testimony to His Glory. —N.T. Wright

The works of God speak not only to His works in saving people but also to God's mighty works in creation. Creation should be the subject, but never the object, of our worship and also the subject of our witness. —John Stott

Sermon Notes: