

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Read the Bible in a Year Challenge

Week 30

Monday	Proverbs 23-25	Psalm 17	Philippians 1
Tuesday	Proverbs 26-28	Psalm 18:1-20	Philippians 2
Wednesday	Proverbs 29-31	Psalm 18:21-50	Philippians 3
Thursday	Ecclesiastes 1-3	Psalm 19	Philippians 4
Friday	Ecclesiastes 4-6	Psalm 20	Colossians 1
Saturday	Ecclesiastes 7-9	Psalm 21	Colossians 2

Sunday: *Enjoy the lessons from Scripture as they are read aloud in Sunday worship. The Bible study summary for each Sunday of the year is found as a separate document on the parish website, under “Adult Education, Bible Study”.*

The Proverbs readings:

1. See the study summary for week 28 for an introduction to Proverbs. Note especially the discussion regarding the personification of Wisdom.
2. Chs. 23 and 24 continue sayings of the wise (begun in ch. 22). The second half of ch. 24 is textually different, and so may be an appendix.
3. Chs. 25 through 29 comprise the second collection of Solomonic proverbs.
 - a. Chs. 25 through 27 are distinct, containing a mixture of commands, prohibitions and comparisons, with some sayings exceeding the more normal length of two lines.
 - b. The sayings are filled with images from nature, and thus reflect some norm of community wisdom.
 - c. Descriptions of the fool and of the proper use of speech are prominent.
 - i. The strength of the sayings about fools and folly (ch. 26) may provide context for Jesus’ harsh condemnation of those who would call others fools (Mtt. 5.22).
4. The book concludes with smaller collections of proverbs. The material is varied and recalls the major themes found earlier in the book.
 - a. The “sayings of Agur” cannot be linked to specific person. The name is non-Israelite, but otherwise unknown, as is the given name of his father, Jakeh. However, the place name given, Massa, is a known northern Arabian location.
 - i. It is possible a literary device is used. The word “Agur” means “I am a sojourner,” and this may thus be a reference to Jacob/Israel, while Jakeh may be an acronym for “the LORD, blessed be”.
 - b. 30:15-33 contain numerical proverbs. These sayings reflect the ancient Near Eastern focus on the significance of numbers as “things” independent of the value they assign.
 - i. The reference to the death of the mocker of father or mother found in v. 17 reflects the ultimate disgrace of being left unburied.

1. Cf. the modern era Arabic curse, in which the crowning ill wished on an enemy is “May the birds of the air consume thy flesh; the sands thy blood.”
5. Ch. 31 contains “sayings of Lemuel,” a series of instructions on proper governance attributed to a king’s mother. The name Lemuel is male, and of non-Israelite origin.
 - a. Immediately after these instructions, the book ends with an acrostic poem on the Good Wife (31.10-31). The portrait completes the feminine imagery used throughout the book.

The Ecclesiastes readings:

1. Ecclesiastes stands squarely in the Wisdom tradition of Scripture, dating from the post-exilic era, probably as late as the third century, B.C.
 - a. The author is stated to be Solomon, but the language of the books makes clear that this is not the case. The Solomonic appellation is a literary convention in Wisdom literature.
 - b. The title derives from the Greek translation of the Hebrew title. In the original Hebrew, the title is *Qoheleth*, which may be translated as the “preacher” or the “one who assembles the worshipping community”.
 - c. Ecclesiastes represents a speculative, critical approach to life and faith. As such, there is a long history of arguments made within parts of the Church that the book should be excluded from the canon of Scripture, and in reality the lectionary only appoints the use of a brief passage on New Year’s Day.
 - i. Ecclesiastes cannot in general be considered to express hope, but this does not mean the book is in any way to be separated from the rest of Scripture, for the book evaluates the temporal with reference to the eternal. The author speaks of the supremacy of God over all of the frustrations and questions of life.
 1. This theme may be related, as well, to the Wisdom themes expressed in Job. Despite frustration in discerning purpose there remains the assurance that God has purpose.
2. The structure of the book is integral to how the book is to be interpreted. The structure is marked by the use of refrains (*e.g.*, “all is vanity and a chasing after wind” in chs. 1-6; “find” in chs. 7-8; “not know” in chs. 9-11).
 - a. The structure is reflected in numerical design, *i.e.*, verse counts.
 - b. The book can be divided into two parts (1.1-6.9 and 6.10-12.14), each part containing 111 verses.
 - i. The refrains indicate the organization of the body of the book into two groups of 93 verses (2.1-6.9 and 6.10-11.6) flanked by an 18 verse introduction and an 18 verse conclusion.
 1. The numbers 18, 93, 11, 186, and 222 are all related to the numerical value for the Hebrew word *hebel*, “vanity”, which itself occurs 37 times in the book (with 37 being the numerical value of *hebel*).
 - a. The verse quantities of smaller units as indicated by the refrains are not random, but in fixed pattern derived from an additive series.
 2. Finally, the book minus epilogue contains 216 verses, which corresponds the numerical value of the books “motto” (found at 1.2, and repeated at the end of the book, “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All in vanity.”)
3. The Preacher investigates life and offers advice (1.1-6.9).

- a. These investigations (*i.e.*, how the author searches for meaning and truth) include:
 - i. An experiment with luxurious living (2.1-11).
 - ii. An evaluation of Wisdom and folly (2.12-17).
 - iii. The problem of inheritance and legacy (2.18-26).
 - iv. The vagaries of toil (3.1-4.6).
 - v. The problem of who else will benefit from one's labors (4.7-16).
 - vi. The loss of enjoyment (4.17-6.9).
4. The Preacher acknowledges that advice is inadequate and that we lack real knowledge of the future (6.10-12.14).
 - a. No one can find out what is good to do (7.1-8.17). Examinations include those of sorrow and adversity, ethical extremes, advice concerning women, and advice concerning the proper relationship to authority.
 - b. No one knows the future (9.1-11.6). Therefore, we do not know the time of misfortune (9.1-12). Events in general are unpredictable, and what evil or good may happen cannot be known.
5. The conclusion (11.7-12.14) includes a poem on enjoyment, youth, and old age.

The psalms: N.B. *In The Bible Challenge the Psalter is read twice (once in each half year). We may all be led into new insights, particularly in focusing on praying each psalm (preferably aloud). See the summary for week 1 for a general introduction.*

1. See the study summaries for weeks 3 and 4.

The readings from Paul's Letter to the Philippians:

1. The Pauline provenance of Philippians has never been seriously questioned. Paul wrote this letter to the church in the principal city of the Roman province of Macedonia, a city which enjoyed the status of a *colonia* (granted the privilege of *ius italica* as a self-governing city), with a significant proportion of the population being retired Roman soldiers who had been given retirement grants in the city.
 - a. About A.D. 50 Paul began the European phase of his missionary journeys. See Acts 16. The city lacked a Jewish synagogue, and Paul began his mission there at a "prayer place," in meetings that would have included Gentiles.
 - b. Despite the character of Philippi being influenced by the presence of many retired soldiers, women appear to have had a prominent place in the Christian church there. Names mentioned include Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4.2-3) and notably Lydia (Acts 16.1-15). The congregation appears to have been predominantly Gentile.
 - c. The letter is probably a conflation of two or three original letters. See, *e.g.*, the change in tone and content at 3.2 and what looks like a fresh start following a conclusion, at 4.9 and 10.
 - i. Scholars divide the letter thusly:
 1. *Letter A* (4.10-20), acknowledging a gift.
 2. *Letter B* (1.1-3.1a; 4.4-7, 21-23), urging unity and joy.
 3. *Letter C* (3.1b-4.3, 8-9), the body of the polemical letter.
 - d. The date of Philippians is probably from the end of Paul's stay at Ephesus (A.D. 54-57), and ranging into some months later (in 58), if the three letter schema is adopted. The letter

was thus written within a decade of the founding of Philippi.

2. Paul's letter is dominated by a theme of joy, and this despite the fact that much of the letter was written while the author was in prison. The letter is written to a community with whom Paul had a long and happy relationship.
 - a. Paul's purposes in writing seem to have included reassuring the Philippians about his own situation and to commend Epaphroditus, who is returning to Philippi. Paul may have wanted to avoid the latter being criticized for not staying with Paul.
 - i. The letter in both lights is, therefore, quite personal, as a sharing between friends and co-laborers.
 - b. The influence on theology of this letter stems in large part from 2.6-11.
3. Paul exhorts unity and steadfastness (1.27-30), humility and selflessness (2.1-11), and about how to remain obedient to God in witnessing to the world (2.12-18).
 - a. He warns against false teachers (3.1b-4.1), and then exhorts unity, joy and peace (4.2-9).
4. The famous passage found at 2.6-11 is referred to as the Christ Hymn. The language here is rhythmic in character, uses parallelism as found in the Old Testament, and uses language which is otherwise rare and uncharacteristic in the Pauline corpus. This language may, therefore, represent a quotation used by Paul, a quotation which may have been in use in the Church in Judea.
 - a. The linguistic structure may reflect an origin in Aramaic.
 - b. The hymn has a basic twofold structure: vv. 6-8 describe Christ's abasement; vv. 9-11 describe His exaltation.
 - i. Christ was in the "from of God" (*en morphé theou*). *Morphé* denotes the essential mode of being by which the essential character or status of something is known.
 - ii. Christ enjoyed a divine way of being.
 - iii. In His exaltation, Jesus is given dominion over all. This despite His abasement to the lowest form of death, on a cross.
 - iv. It is because of His abasement and exaltation that Jesus "is at work in you" (v. 13).

The readings from Paul's Letter to the Colossians:

1. Colossae was an important city in Asia Minor, largely destroyed by earthquake in A.D. 60/61. The population was comprised of native Phrygians, Greeks, and many Jews. The Christian community was mainly Gentile, and was probably founded by the Colossae native Epaphras (1.7; 4.12).
 - a. The slave Onesimus and his master, Philemon, were also from Colossae (Philemon).
2. Many scholars believe Paul did not write Colossians. Contrary to this view is the very early acceptance of the letter as written by Paul.
 - a. Regardless of whether Paul's hand or those of a Pauline school wrote this letter, it's influence in the Church was from the beginning significant, in part because it represents an evolution in thought from the "church" being (in each letter) a local congregation to the Church being a universal entity, the Body of which Christ is the head (1.18, 24; 2.19; 3.15).
3. The letter may be outlined as follows:
 - a. Address and greeting: 1.1-2.
 - b. Extended thanksgiving: 1.3-23.
 - c. Body-Opening: 1.25-2.5.
 - d. Body-Middle: 2.6-4.6:

- i. Exhortation related to philosophy: 2.6-3-4.
 - ii. More general exhortation (*e.g.*, as related to Christian character and God's purpose): 3.5-4.6.
 - iii. Body-Closing: 4.7-9.
 - iv. Closing: Greetings, hortatory remarks, benediction (4.10-18).
4. What is the philosophy Paul is opposing? Academic arguments have identified candidates ranging from a Jewish form of Gnosticism to mysticism, to Hellenistic mystery cults, to neo-Pythagoreanism. No consensus exists. The point seems to be that Paul is opposing a temptation to be "spiritual" as opposed to having *faith* in Jesus Christ!
- a. Paul is opposed, as well, to any temptation to dualism (the idea that there are powers of Good and Evil that each have specific power over humans, and that war with each other).
 - b. Paul wants his readers to avoid syncretism, the view that elements of differing faiths can be combined into a person "spiritual" experience.
 - i. He therefore focuses on the apostolic authority of the Gospel and on Christology. He wants his readers to know that the message is authentic, and who Jesus is.
 - c. Paul is also focused on soteriology (the theology of salvation), on the death and resurrection of Jesus effecting a divine deliverance of human beings into a new humanity, and the benefits this new status includes.
 - d. Paul's eschatology (theology of end times and judgment) in Colossians is the same as found in his other letters. What God has accomplished for human beings in Jesus Christ affects all the cosmos.
 - e. The Church in the world is a dominant theme. Believers' identity is dependent upon their relationship with Jesus Christ.
 - f. God's activity in Jesus Christ provides the key wisdom by which the reality of the new reality in Jesus is understood.