

## READING PSALMS AND PROVERBS

**Psalms** are Hebrew "musical poetry." Their goal is to show us, "how to pray and how to praise Him in order to live a truly happy life" (G. Parsons). Poetry aims at our *emotions* and uses frequent figurative language to move us, thus it should not be taken literally. For example, Psalm 36:7 does not teach us that God has wings, but that his people find refuge in him as little birdlings do so under their parents' wings.

Poets also use *intentional exaggeration* (hyperbole) and other figures of speech to make an emotional point. For example, Psalm 42:3 does not teach that the author ate his tears all day long, but that he experienced prolonged and intense sadness.

Hebrew poetry frequently uses *parallelism*, where two lines reinforce each other. This is done for emotional effect and expresses a unified point. For example, in Psalm 19:1, both lines give a complementary message — the sky testifies to God's glory.

Because of the above, Psalms should not be used to establish doctrine. They are emotional reflections in line with the doctrine taught elsewhere in the Bible.

Psalms can be *communal* and *individual*. Their mood can be *lament* (sad expressions, showing that it is okay to bring our negative emotions to God), *praise* (hymns), or *thanksgiving*.

The *imprecatory* Psalms, where the author prays for God's judgment on his enemies (e.g., 35, 109, etc.), pose a special challenge. Their interpretation is controversial, and their language might be exaggerated for effect, but Christians generally agree that they are not meant for us to copy in light of the New Testament teachings. They can perhaps help us temporarily channel negative emotions, but these should last only very shortly (see Ephesians 4:26–27) and we should bring every negative situation to God who taught us to love our enemies and pray for them.

Finally, some of the Psalms are, at least in part, predictive of Christ's work (these are called *messianic*, for example, 2, 16, 22, and 110), and give us special encouragement.

**Proverbs** belong to wisdom literature. The book was made as a training manual for Israel's youth and contains much timeless wisdom. Note, however, that this book *does not* contain God's covenant promises but rather gives "inspired common sense" of how things in life ordinarily work out. Because they are not covenant promises, we should not be surprised if we occasionally experience exceptions. For example, Proverbs 22:6 indicates that if parents train their children in the faith, they will stay in it forever. However, if Christian parents have a godless adult child, it does not automatically mean they failed to train them properly or that God failed. This proverb reflects how things generally work, not how they must work.

Also, at least some statements in Proverbs are not to be taken as "absolute." For example, 26:4 and 26:5 "contradict" each other at first glance, yet both are true but are applicable in different situations.

Finally, Proverbs makes several promises regarding wealth, but keep in mind that in the New Covenant wealth is defined not through material possessions, but through spiritual riches. This means that the application of these passages has to be adjusted accordingly.

It is my prayer that you will be encouraged and edified as you dive into this well-beloved portion of God's Word.