

1. **Introduction:** For the purposes of our studies on this website, we will make a distinction between the classic “Wisdom Writings” of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes as the three books that comprise “Wisdom Literature” in the Old Testament; and the “Worship Writings” of Psalms and Song of Songs. Though the five are often included together in the discussion of wisdom writings, and they share many similarities as Hebrew Poetry; there is enough of a distinction to place the latter two in a category of their own as worship writings, which will be considered as a separate specialized genre.
 - a. These three books of wisdom writings are described by Derrick Kidner as being the “three houses” of Old Testament poetry, each with some distinctions of their own but with sufficient similarities to be considered as one literary genre. These three books explore an uncertain and often hostile world:
 - i. Where Job is viewed as the “Home Stricken” – where unforeseen calamity has fallen upon a once prosperous family, who struggle as they try to understand how God has allowed this disaster that has come upon them. In a long process of self-examination and peer judgment, all are forced into a new theological understanding of the world in which they live.
 - ii. Where Proverbs is viewed as the “Seven Pillared House of Wisdom” – with its focus on family dynamics, demonstrating the ideals a family should strive for as in order to thrive under God’s blessing in a “well provisioned and well-ordered home.”
 - iii. Where Ecclesiastes is viewed as a “Great House in the grip of a slow and inexorable decay,” where the once prosperous house is slowly declining with the ravages of time.

Kidner explains that these books are to be understood as “Voices in Counterpoint – These books clearly cover three aspects of existence which no one can afford to overlook: 1) the enigma of calamities that are beyond control or explanation [Job]; 2) the demands of practical good management [Proverbs]; and 3) the tantalizing hollowness and brevity of human life [Ecclesiastes].”¹
 - b. Wisdom writings are a part of the Biblical literature genre of Poetry. From our review of Hermeneutics the Art of Biblical Interpretation we understand that poetry communicates in terms of emotions and imagery, whereas narrative tends

¹ Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, page 116

to be the more literal literary form. Wisdom writings are intended to be experienced:

- i. With the imagination – that “sees” the pictures unfolding as a screenplay or movie. Visual images are a means of communication employed in poetry.
 - ii. With the emotions – that “feels” the author’s joy, despair, outrage, sorrow, etc., as you allow the text to wash over you. Relational feelings are a means of communication employed in poetry.
- c. For more on the genre of poetry please refer to www.authenticdiscipleship.org “Hermeneutics – the Interpretation of Scripture” under the Biblical Literacy tab in Part 2 and starting on page 14 of the pdf file - <http://www.authenticdiscipleship.org/pdfs/1-biblical-literacy/Interpreting%20Scripture%20-%20Part%202.pdf>
2. **Job:** is considered by many scholars to be the oldest book of Scripture. Job shares the underlying foundation with the Torah and Proverbs, and deals particularly with the problem of pain and suffering that befalls many in a fallen world order. Job asserts that one can act properly within the moral and ethical context of the Covenant with Yahweh, and suffer anyway.
- a. The “theology of success” often presumed by Old Testament Jews [and many Christians as the “Prosperity Gospel”] crashes upon the rocks of this view of reality, as many “good” people often suffer while many “evil” people seem to succeed. Job confronts us with the uneasy question of Spiritual and worldly cause and effect. As God’s people, why do we do what we do? Is our motivation for achieving temporal material gain? Or do we follow God simply because He is God seeking enduring Spiritual benefit? Obedience in faith is presented as the appropriate response of fallen humanity to a Sovereign God; regardless of whether we can understand the circumstances. God is not our “Genie in the Bottle” where by doing the right things in the right manner, we can manipulate Him to get what we want. The correct approach is demonstrated as being obedient and faithful because He is God and works all things out of the good of His people [Romans 8:28].
 - b. Job’s wife and friends utilized conventional wisdom based upon their imperfect world view and concluded that Job had sinned, which caused his fall from grace and the resulting suffering he was enduring. They pronounced Job guilty without any real knowledge of Job’s heart or of God’s purpose. Many make the same

mistake today presuming bad things only really happen when you are outside of God's will. Even Christians still often judge their brothers and sisters based on what we observe instead of realizing we cannot know the heart of another – only God alone knows what is actually in a person's heart [2 Corinthians 5:12; Proverbs 27:19]. The New Testament imperative is stated in Matthew 7:2 – “For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” God's Grace is not a “one-sized fits all” proposition, and God having created humanity as individuals, engages us and journeys with us accordingly.

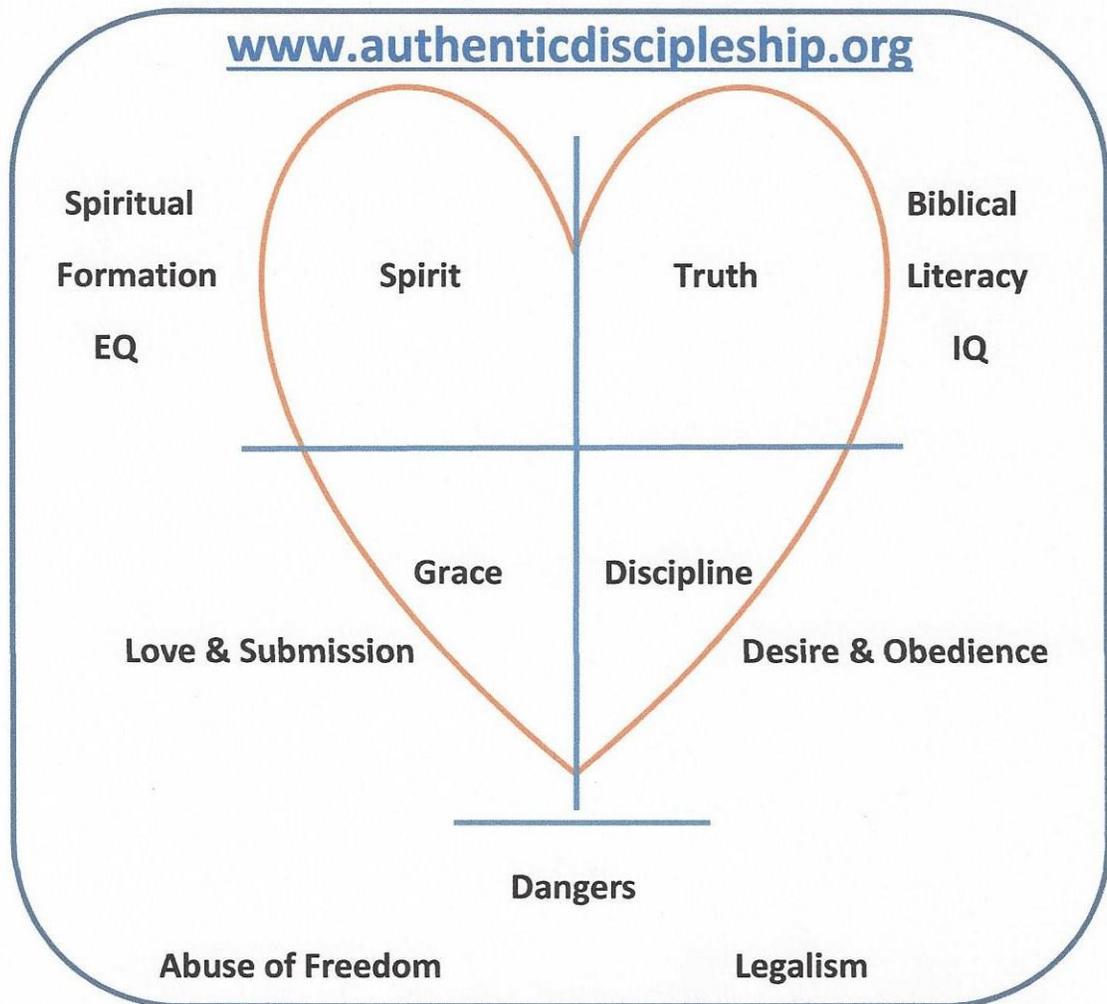
- c. The message of Job concludes that God alone is Sovereign, and that man is incapable of understanding the entirety of God's methods or purposes. In the end, we have a choice – to trust God or not. The message of Job is that we trust God to our gain, and we doubt Him to our peril. The message of Job also states that there is a Spiritual world that is going on behind the scenes, and where we are caught up in something much larger than what we can see with our sense. It also shows that this Spiritual world can be known through revelation as a gift of God.
- d. As Christians, we have had many conversations with believers and non-believers alike about the Truth of the Christian faith. Many struggle with the problems of the pain and suffering we see around us. While many have been raised within a Christian home, some cannot help but hold God responsible for the world's personal, political, social, and cultural troubles. Many conclude that God ought to intervene in such a miraculous fashion that no one on earth could doubt God's existence or His purpose. The argument goes something like this, “If God is all loving and good, then why does He allow....” For this, there is no adequate worldly response to the argument. It is the timeless question for both the faithful and the faithless – for those who believe no proof is necessary; while for those who do not believe, no proof will suffice.
- e. Job speaks powerfully into the question of what constitutes Truth and Who is the proper object of reverence and obedience. Two thousand years ago God answered this question in the person and work of Jesus the Christ. Something utterly amazing occurred within the context of recordable history, and two thousand years later we are still discussing and debating about it. Some argue that the Biblical events were merely a spiritualization of other-worldly ideals and that it is impossible to render Truth from the accounts of Jesus' life, substitutionary death, and resurrection. For me, the most compelling proof of the Truth of Jesus and His resurrection is in the recorded nature of the men who accompanied Jesus

and knew Him best. The New Testament is written with a combination of eye witnesses and from accounts of eye witnesses. And then something extraordinary happened to them between the conclusion of the gospels and the Book of Acts. They went from spineless and defeatist followers, to fearless and determined leaders who willingly went to their deaths proclaiming the Truth of Jesus as the Resurrected Christ who was and is the final answer and revelation of God's covenant love. People do not willingly die for what they know to be a lie, and reportedly a million of God's people perished in the persecution that followed Jesus' death. I was not there, but I am confident that human nature has not changed dramatically in two thousand years... people don't willingly die for a lie. Those who saw Him and knew the Truth, willingly chose the eternal truth and accepted the temporal physical death that followed, rather than chose the alternative of an eternal lie and temporal physical life.

3. **Proverbs:** are a composite mosaic of ethical and moral imperatives based upon the covenantal relationship of God [YAWEH] with His chosen people. The writers of Proverbs used creation, nature, and everyday life situations to demonstrate order, purpose and balance as desired virtues over shadowing the worldly problems of chaos, meaninglessness, and uncontrolled animal passions. This message is another application reinforced from the text of Genesis.
 - a. The Proverbs presume and express absolute truths of a hoped for perfection, while acknowledging that things in a Fallen world order are far less than perfect. In this context, life is seen as a journey to be walked with faith in the presence of God, and the company of the faithful rather than a legalistic formula to be followed to obtain success.
 - b. Many people absolutely love the proverbs, and diligently memorize and quote these texts as a primary life-guidance system. While there is much benefit in knowing and properly applying all Biblical Truth, it is important to understand that the ideal presented isn't always attainable.
 - c. The Proverbs present a world view that is primarily one that is "black or white" and "good or bad." The decrees presented in Proverbs tend to promote an understanding of the world in relation to "The Law" of the Old Testament, rather than by "The Grace" of the New Testament. Many Christians desperately desire and employ wisdom as a means of understanding reality and finding personal justification in the presence of God. As Christians we know that Grace is vastly superior to the Law, and that Salvation is by Grace alone [God's unmerited gift]

and not by works [positive actions]. The Apostles Paul and James are in agreement in arguing that Grace resulting in a “born again” commitment to discipleship will result in a life that expresses a new value system and a motivational world view that will exhibit positive actions. Positive actions are an indicator that a value change has occurred, but the works alone do not render a person justified in God’s view. The true proof of a redeemed life is Spiritual fruit being formed in the character of Christ followers – for more on this, see <http://www.authenticdiscipleship.org/pdfs/3-leadership-dev/LD%20-%204.4%20-%20Coaching%20for%20Character%20Development.pdf>

- d. Christian living and ministry often occurs in the balance between the bondage of legalism on the far right, and the unconstrained freedom of Grace or liberalism on the far left. Many who ponder this matter find it more comfortable standing somewhere in the middle of the road, where the mind made sharp by discipline is balanced with a heart made soft by the work of the Holy Spirit. All too often when we become over confident in our knowledge of Scripture and of ourselves, we run the risk of becoming hard-hearted, sanctimonious, and closed-minded. Of such people Jesus quoted Isaiah in Matthew 13:15 – “For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.” In other words, these people knew the Law, but it did not change their heart or their world view... they did not love God or identify with God’s plan for the restoration of humanity through faith in Jesus the Messiah.
- e. In contemplating ministry objectives, I find great benefit for those who are balanced between the mind strengthening application of Scriptural wisdom, and the heart softening application of praiseful worshipping. While I enjoy Proverbs, I would have to say my favorite Old Testament book is Psalms. I do not think it is by accident that Psalms and Proverbs are immediate neighbors in the Bible. They fulfill a much-needed balance of the interdependency of mind and heart for the health of the God’s people through the ages.
- f. In considering those more disposed toward legalism, I don’t think it is surprising that they have greater dependency on their mind, and the relational pull of the heart is often ignored.
- g. The “Heart-Cross Diagram that follows is a pictorial representation of a balanced life of Grace and Discipline:



The "Heart-Cross" Diagram depicting Spiritual Life in Balance. Human Hearts have 2 halves and 4 chambers, and are fully functional when all are working together.

4. **Ecclesiastes**: speaks powerfully and wistfully to the transience of the things of the material world – life is not only short, but humanity is weak and inconsequential compared to the eternal nature and incomparable strength of God. A casual reading of Ecclesiastes may seem to mock God and imbue humanity with a rather cavalier or even fatalist attitude towards the eternal. Instead, the text promotes the understanding that man's best efforts are simply inadequate. Nothing humanity can do will endure – it is all in the final analysis "meaningless." Only in the context of God is meaning and purpose found. Moreover, man is incapable of discovering eternal truth on his own; it is only through Divine revelation that we can come to know and understand eternal truth.
 - a. Death is the great equalizer of Ecclesiastes – everyone born will die... it is a matter of how and when, not if. At one time or another we all must struggle with the

reality of failing health and mental faculties, especially as mortality looms larger as we age. My own family is an object lesson of the impact of Ecclesiastes. My Dad had symptoms of the early onset of Alzheimer's, and my Mom had heart disease. My Dad was physically strong but mentally he was weakening, while my mother was the reverse. My dad faced his uncertain future with his characteristic good humor and faith. He had a great heart that was loving and compassionate, and he trusted God. My mom faced her uncertain future with trepidation and fear. She worried about anything she was unable to control, not realizing she was really in control of nothing. She finally came to the place of desperation and let go of her burden and trusted God, only to take up her burden again.

- b. Into this human condition of an uncertain life and the certainty of death, the writer of Ecclesiastes concludes that all "human activity is either temporarily materially fleeting, or intellectually futile," that "death renders all human activity meaningless," and that "life should be enjoyed as a gift from God." My dad seemed to intuitively understand this, while its truth eluded my mom.
- c. One of my favorite verses is Ecclesiastes 1:9, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." Each generation believes they have discovered something new – new sins, new entertainment, new knowledge, new experiences – when in fact they have been experienced by countless generations before, and as many more as occur until Jesus comes again... this will happen either at the end of our lives or the end of time. No one gets off the planet alive.
- d. The repeated phrases of "find/not find" and "know/not know" seek to explore the question of human knowing... and if there is adequate compensation to wisdom, it is not located in this world... meaning "under the sun" [2:11]. The inference of this text points us to a better future beyond the sun... a future not under the sun, but under the Son [Jesus]. The language and images used here bring to mind Jesus' words recorded in Matthew 7:7-12... "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

- e. The conclusion of Ecclesiastes is that we should not rely on ourselves... either our own strength or our own understanding. And also not to rely upon other people who we presume capable of caring for our present and future needs. Instead, we should rely upon God who alone is all knowing and all powerful, as well as being completely dependable, merciful, and just.

5. Personal Reflection:

- a. As a young pre-Christian “seeker of truth,” I placed great importance on knowledge and wisdom, and in my desire to know who God was I have read and studied many of the world’s wisdom and spiritual writings including the Hindu texts of the Rig-Veda, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita; the Taoist text of the Tao te Ching; the teachings of the Buddha – the Paradise Scriptures and Lotus of the Good Law; the writings of American Indians including Black Elk Speaks and the mythical writings of Carlos Castaneda and his teachings of Don Juan; as well as the Tibetan Lamaism writings of T. Lobsang Rampa. I also engaged in Eastern Metaphysics and dabbled in the spiritual world of metaphysics and psychic phenomenon. All of these pursuits were my feeble attempt to encounter and understand “The Truth.” The result of my efforts only brought me to the hard won conclusion that Truth was hopelessly beyond my grasp. All the experiences of life, and all the studies and disciplines I could pursue would not bring me the understanding and meaning of life. It was entirely futile for me to try to put it all together into a coherent and reasonable philosophy of life.
- b. Looking back, I wisely concluded that I could not think or find my way to God. Rather, I was dependent upon God’s own Self-revelation of Himself to me... which I came to understand as the Bible. Biblical wisdom writings rightly concluded thousands of years ago what I only learned the hard way 40 years ago:
 - i. “Now that all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: fear God [Yahweh – the personal covenant keeping God] and keep His commands” [Ecclesiastes 12:13 – written approximately 3,000 BC].
 - ii. Or as Paul concluded... “Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom

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God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" [1 Corinthians 1:20-25 – written approximately 2,000 years ago].

- 6. In conclusion, God provided these three viewpoints of wisdom literature in the Bible, which effectively demonstrate that "Being wise, at bottom, does not entail a mass of facts to be learned; it is [ultimately] a relationship with God."² As God's people and through relational context with the world, we can enter into the life of those to whom we minister to and help them see the Truth that God in His mercy provided for us – we can be His best witnesses. The Bible after all, is a long love letter from our Creator... who wants to be known, experienced, and enjoyed forever. The Bible is not intended to solve all our problems or answer all our questions, but it will introduce us to the One who alone is Truth Personified and provides Faith, Hope, and Love – 1 Corinthians 13:13.**

² Longman, [Making sense of the Old Testament](#)