



Aim of lesson

To introduce the poetic books of the Bible and to show that they not only have important lessons for us about our relationship with God but also can be helpful and encouraging. We can learn from the experiences of the authors, who wrote of their feelings in situations that we may well experience.

Bible background

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon

Preparation required

The NIV Study Bible has an excellent introduction for each book if you need background material and it would be useful to have one in the lesson.

Outline of lesson

Overview of books

Start with a 'brain storming' or 'mind mapping' session to try and gauge exactly how much the students already know and to identify the gaps or areas of confusion. You can do this by using a big sheet of paper which the teacher and/or the students scribble on e.g. 'Job was a man who had lots of things go wrong in his life' or 'Psalms are songs and poetry written by David'. This paper can also be used to write down questions the students might have, like 'Why did God punish Job for being good?' Encourage them to have a guess at authorship and date of writing and see if they can write down any other events that might be happening at that time. At the end of the lesson, you can refer back to this sheet and see how much you have learnt and how many questions have been answered.

Get the students to look through each book in turn. They could use a Bible with headings and the introductions in the NIV Study Bible. You may need to pick out particular passages for them. Ask them to discuss amongst themselves what they think the main aspects of each book are and come up with a brief statement (no longer than two sentences) to summarise each one. This could be written in the students' books.

Examples would be:

	Suggested help	Notes
Job	Outline in NIV Study Bible introduction Chapters 1, 38, 42.	The story of a man who found a true relationship with God through much suffering.
Psalms	Psalms 18, 72, 74, 90.	Poems or songs written by David and others expressing their love and their relationship to God.
Proverbs	Outline in NIV Study Bible introduction. Headings of early chapters and chapters 30 and 31.	A collection of sayings (rather different from our English proverbs) which can guide us in leading a godly life.
Ecclesiastes	Headings throughout particularly chapters 11 and 12.	A book written by an important man – Solomon – reflecting on what really matters in life.
Song of Solomon	Outline in NIV Study Bible introduction and any sample chapter.	An allegorical poem about the love of God for his people.

The students may come up with a different aspect so they can all be considered and any differences or similarities noted and discussed.

Which books do these verses come from?

The students could look at the verses in their books and decide which book (Job, Psalms, etc.) they belong to. They might decide to learn some for homework. The verses could be displayed on the wall as memory joggers over the next few sessions or the class or teacher could make laminated bookmarks with the verses on them.

The verses are:

- I know that you can do all things; and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (Job 42:2)
- Let everything that has breath praise the Lord (Psalm 150:6).
- The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7)
- The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man (Ecclesiastes 12:13)
- I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine (Song of Solomon 6:3).

Historical context

Talk about the author and date of each book, and get the class to mark when the books were written on the timeline.

Job

When it was written is unknown although most Bible students agree that it is one of the very early books¹ of the Bible. It records events that probably occurred during the time of the patriarchs - about 2000 – 1800 BC. The land of Uz is possibly located northeast of Palestine, near the desert land between Damascus and the Euphrates River.

Ezekiel (14:14, 20) and James (5:11) both mention Job as a historical character. If the students have problems understanding exactly what happened or how the characters seem to have taken it in turns to speak you could point out that it is a poetical book, possibly a play, but it is there to tell us about God and our relationship to him.

The Psalms

As far as we can see the earliest Psalm (Psalm 90 and maybe 91) was written by Moses, maybe towards his death around 1410 BC.

The latest Psalms were written at the time of the Babylonian captivity (586 BC). Psalm 137 has already been mentioned in lesson 19, so it may be interesting to see whether the young people remember it!

David wrote 73 or more; Asaph 12; Solomon 2 and there are many without titles, but it seems clear that the majority were written in David's lifetime and around.

Psalms are quoted extensively in New Testament often by Jesus (the students will have seen this in lesson 7). Sometimes these quotations confirm that the Psalm was indeed written by David - like Acts 2:25-28, where Peter quotes from Psalm 16:8-11.

You may like to bring out lessons from some individual Psalms:

- Psalm 51 - written by David after his sin with Bathsheba
- Psalm 57 - see David's trust in God when he was fleeing from Saul
- Psalm 69 - looks forward to Jesus (v4, 7-9, 20-21). Also, v22-23 are quoted in Romans 11:9-10 and v25 in Acts 1:20.
- Psalm 73 - see how David's worried state of mind is eased when he goes 'into the sanctuary of the Lord' (v17).
- Psalms 93-100 are known as 'Royal' Psalms - see Psalm 93:1; 95:3; 96:6; 97:1,9; 99:1).
- Psalm 109:8 is quoted in Acts 1:20 as applying to Judas Iscariot, and maybe much of the rest of the Psalm is about Judas as well.
- Psalm 119 - the verses are in groups. In each group all 8 verses begin with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet: 22 letters x 8 = 176.
- Psalms 120-134 are headed 'A Song of Ascents', and they describe a journey which begins in exile and ends in the house of God. The journey of our lives too.
- Psalm 139 talks of how God knows all about us.
- Psalms 126-150 all begin and end with the words 'Praise the Lord'.

Proverbs

Solomon wrote most of the book, though possibly David wrote the proverbs that form chapters 1-9 see all the references to 'my son' in 1:8, 15 etc., and the heading to chapter 10). There are some later contributions by Agur and Lemuel. It will have been written in the early part of Solomon's reign. You may like to choose a selection of Proverbs that are relevant to your class, and ask each of them to choose one and comment on it.

¹ There are several reasons why Job is thought to be one of the first books of the Bible to be written but if the young people should ask you could take them to Genesis 36. In v15, Esau's firstborn son is named as Eliphaz, the name of one of Job's friends (Job 2:11); in v28 Uz is mentioned (Uz is the land where Job came from, and in v34 the Temanites are mentioned (Job's friend Eliphaz was a Temanite)..

Ecclesiastes

The author is most likely to be Solomon and it looks as though he wrote it late in his life as he is looking back and considering. Probably around 935 BC. Note the recurring phrase 'under the sun'; Solomon is looking at a life without God, and concludes that it is meaningless. If we spend all our lives working, and at the end everything is lost, then we have been wasting our time.

Song of Solomon

Probably written in early Solomon's reign while he was still young and idealistic. Not all Bible students are sure that it was written by Solomon. It is interesting to compare Song 3:6-11 with Psalm 45, because the Psalm is quoted in Hebrews 1:8-9 as describing the Lord Jesus.

Relevance to our lives

God is a God who understands our emotions and feelings. Think about all the raw emotions revealed in Psalms and Job. God understands us. He doesn't expect us to be perfect (remember Job). This will really help some of the more emotional students who are probably feeling that no one understands them and that they will never be good enough to be accepted, least of all into God's family.

The books also show us that God is much greater than we are. He does have all the answers and we can ask him for wisdom and understanding like Solomon did and he will give it to us. We cannot ever be good enough on our own but we live in faith that God has provided the perfect sacrifice – his own Son.

You could pick out one or two of your favourite passages and explain why you like them but don't labour the point. Different things appeal to different people and our main aim should be to give the class a desire to read them for themselves.

Extension activities

Hebrew poetry

This is an aspect which may be worth considering especially as some of the students may be involved in studies of English poetry for examinations. In Hebrew poetry there is no rhyme or formal meter having a regular pattern of words or syllables in each line. The key elements of Hebrew poetry are parallelism and rhythm. The simplest form of parallelism is that in which the lines of the verse are grouped into twos, with the second line repeating the meaning of the first but in different words. Thus in Psalm 83v14

As fire consumes the forest
Or a flame sets the mountains ablaze
So pursue them with your tempest
And terrify them with your storm.

There are different forms of parallelism; sometimes the second couplet is not a similar thought but a contrasting one e.g. Psalm 90:6 the Psalmist is speaking of life being as fragile as grass in a field;

Though in the morning it springs up new
By evening it is dry and withered.

Sometimes the parallelism involves comparing the literal with the metaphorical. Thus in Psalm 42:1 the Psalmist writes:

As the deer pants for streams of water
So my soul pants for you, O God.

Poetry is found in all these books and also in the prophets too. Poetry is easier to remember.

Many of these thoughts have been put to music and it is probably worth listening to some favourite hymns and songs to reinforce this and help the students realise that they can learn the words just like the Israelites of the past did. After all, most of them will be able to quote the lyrics of their favourite pop tunes.

If the lesson is going to be spread over a few weeks, it might be a good idea to ask the students to look through the Psalms, Proverbs or Ecclesiastes and choose a favourite one to say a few words about. You could do this too, explaining how a particular passage has helped you spiritually through a difficult time.

Job

Job is an important book and you should aim to get the main message across because of its relevance to our lives today: our lives are in God hands and he is greater than us.

Ask the students to read Job 1:1 and then Job 42:5-6. Ask them to think of reasons why Job who is initially described as blameless and upright has to repent in dust and ashes at the end of the book. It is important to get the message across that

Job did not understand what a right relationship with God was based on. He thinks that his personal 'goodness' is important and he believes that if he could put his case before God, God would acquit him – Job 23:4-7

I would state my case before him
And fill my mouth with arguments
I would find out what he would answer me
And consider what he would say
Would he oppose me with great power?
No, he would not press charges against me
There an upright man could present his case before him
And I would be delivered for ever from my judge

Job's sufferings help him learn humility and realise that it is God's grace that saves us.

Proverbs

It might be a good idea to choose a few examples to illustrate the wisdom found in this book and stress that this is because the writers were inspired by God.

It tells about the things that God hates e.g. violence 3:31; untruths 12:22; sacrifice of the wicked 15:8; the way of the wicked 15:9; the thoughts of the wicked 15:26; the proud 16:5; those who judge unjustly 17:15 and haughtiness, lying, murdering, scheming, eagerness to do evil, a false witness, stirring up dissension 6:16-19.

It tells us how to be wise in God's eyes especially in chapters 10 – 24.

Ecclesiastes

This book can really speak to teenagers as it specifically states that Solomon has tried it all and found this life wanting. This negates the 'I want to live and try things out before I commit myself to God' approach because someone has already done it all and come to the conclusion that serving God now is what is important.

Chapter 2:1-9 describes Solomon's 'experiment' with pleasure, sex, alcohol, buildings, gardens and slaves and he found that it was meaningless. The students may want to relate this to the celebrity lifestyle we are surrounded by today. How many famous people waste their lives and end up unhappy? Those who appear more settled are often those who have found something greater purpose in their lives. This will probably generate a lot of discussion.

Song of Solomon

This is a difficult book for some people to discuss with teenagers but it is good to realise that God created sex and that it is nothing to be ashamed of in the right relationship. God wants us to be fulfilled and he is not some Victorian, disapproving father who finds sex embarrassing. The teenagers may feel a little awkward about reading a few of the passages but they will have all experienced much more detailed descriptions during sex education lessons!