

God's Definition of Wisdom

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[0 : 0 0] Well, perhaps you would turn with me to Job chapter 28, on page 435 in the Visitor's Bibles, Job chapter 28.

Now, it's a couple of weeks since we've been together here in the book of Job, so I think I should spend at least a moment or two getting us back up to speed with a reminder of the story so far before we immerse ourselves.

Aha, that's better, isn't it? I think you perhaps heard what I said, so I won't go back to the beginning, but we'll just pick up and recap the story so far before we get into chapter 28.

Now, Job himself, the man Job, is introduced to us in chapter 1, verse 1, as a blameless and upright man who feared God and turned away from evil.

Those are the two key phrases about him, he feared God and turned away from evil. Now, we're intended to hold that description of Job in our minds as we read the whole book.

[1 : 0 4] He's a believer. He fears God. And because he fears God, he has developed a sensitivity towards evil and wrongdoing, such that he has grown instinctively to turn away from them.

It would be simply too bland to say that Job was a religious man and a moral man. Chapter 1, verse 1 speaks of him in more earthy and vivid language, as a man who fears God and turns away from evil.

However, this fine, upright, believing man in a sudden series of traumatic catastrophes loses his wealth and his children.

Can any of the children here tell me how many children he lost? Any of the young ones? Ten. That's right. Do you remember whether they were little children or grown up? Can another child tell me that?

Yes? They were grown up. I mean, it would have been just as bad if they'd been little, but they were grown up children. And he lost all ten of them in one day. There was a freak storm and the house fell down and they were all there and they were all killed.

[2 : 1 0] And then, shortly afterwards, he lost his health. He became terribly ill. So, Job was transformed overnight from a respected leader in the community to a desperately sick man who is reduced to sitting on a heap of ashes, scraping his irritating sores with a piece of broken pottery.

But in the first two chapters of the book, we, the readers, are shown something which Job is not shown. Namely, that his sufferings are the result of the Lord giving permission to Satan, the devil, to afflict him.

Now, the Lord is sovereign and he permits Satan only to afflict Job, not to kill Job. But we are meant to understand clearly that it was Satan who wrecked Job's life and that it was the Lord who allowed Satan to do so.

So, we're in very difficult, painful territory even before we're out of chapter two. The next thing that happens is that Job's three friends, his so-called comforters, turn up at the end of chapter two.

But far from comforting Job in his troubles, for the next 24 chapters or so, they harass him, they harangue him and they have a blazing row with him. His argument to them is to say, I'm innocent.

[3 : 34] So, how can the Lord be doing all this to me? Their argument is, but Job, you simply cannot be innocent. We live in a morally tidy universe in which suffering is always the consequence of wrongdoing.

Therefore, your sufferings prove that you are a wicked man, so you can forget this talk of innocence. Now, it's a happy thing for us, the reader, that in the final chapter of the book, chapter 42, the Lord gives his verdict on the altercation between Job and his friends.

And the Lord says that Job is indeed in the right and that his friends are in the wrong. Although Job didn't know that verdict while he was locked in argument with his three friends.

But all this reminds us of the big question that lies right at the heart of the book of Job. And that is the question, why should an innocent believer suffer?

Why should a person who both fears God and turns his back on evil have to endure bitter and terrifying events that rob him of his wealth, his family, and then his health?

[4 : 44] Well, we're just about to turn to chapter 28, but first let's look at the stage that things have reached in chapter 27. Let's pick it up from verse 3 in chapter 27.

Now, Job is still speaking to his comforters and he says this, 27.3, As long as my breath is in me and the Spirit of God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood and my tongue will not utter deceit.

Far be it from me to say that you are right. Till I die, I will not put away my integrity from me. So Job has no intention of budging.

I'm in the right, he says to them, and you're in the wrong. Have you ever heard that kind of talk before anywhere? We have it in our kitchen at home sometimes.

He says to her, I'm in the right. You're looking at this from the wrong angle altogether. She replies, no, you foolish man. No, she never says that, but she says no. You just can't see it, can you?

[5 : 47] You're in the wrong, I'm right about it. You've got the wrong perspective on this thing. Have you ever had that sort of conversation with somebody close to you? Now, the difference between that kind of kitchen conversation and Job's words in chapter 27, verse 5, is that Job really was in the right.

And his friends, although well-meaning, really were in the wrong. But it's in chapter 27 that the argument between Job and his comforters runs into the buffers.

It's a stalemate. Neither side will give ground. And you're almost left with the impression at the end of chapter 27 that both sides fall silent. They've fired their bullets at their opponents, but their opponents are still standing.

And there's a feeling of, so where on earth do we go from here? You say this, I say that. You say goodbye, I say hello. You won't budge, I certainly won't budge.

What we need is a bit of wisdom to enlighten our dilemma. But there's a problem. How do we come by wisdom? Is it possible to make sense of the dreadful suffering of an innocent, godly man?

[7 : 03] And it's at this point that we reach chapter 28. Job is probably still speaking through the whole chapter, but his tone has changed. This chapter is quite different from the slanging match that precedes it.

It's an extended pause for reflection. The frantic argumentation that has been going on stops. So chapter 28 is rather like slack water after a swift running tide has come in.

Everything is calm for a while before the momentum picks up again. And the key question of chapter 28, the question which sets the agenda for the whole chapter, is expressed in verse 12.

But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? And you'll see that verse 20 repeats the same questions. From where then does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding?

Now the context of chapter 28 helps us to understand the force of these questions in verse 12 and verse 20. Remember, we're not here in the debating chamber of the Cambridge University Union.

[8 : 11] We're not playing around here with philosophical debate, cracking jokes and scoring points and putting opponents down with rhetorical gymnastics. It isn't that kind of thing.

This is not armchair debating. This is wheelchair debating. I know that Job isn't literally in a wheelchair at this point, but he's asking these questions from a position of intense suffering.

He is not at ease, either in body or mind. He desperately needs wisdom in order to understand why he, an innocent believer, should be suffering.

So the questions of verse 12, repeated in verse 20, are not generalized philosophical questions about the nature of wisdom. They are focused questions about how to understand innocent suffering like that of Job.

And for that reason, they're really helpful questions for the likes of ordinary people like you and me. I say that because you and I are not likely to be joining some highfalutin philosophical debating society.

[9 : 15] But we are all going to need wisdom in the way that Job needed it because we are all going to suffer. This is happening to families all the time. We returned from a little holiday just this morning.

We'd been away for a few days. We opened the post and we saw their news from friends in Burton-on-Trent that a girl aged 15 whose parents are well known to Catherine and me had been killed in a road accident just this last week.

Two girls, one 15, one 11 or 12 and the older one gone. Just like that. Pain, pain. Not as intensely as Job suffered.

I hope none of us will. But all of us will know suffering at a real painful level at some future point in our lives. That's why these questions are so important to us.

There may be some here tonight who at this very moment for some reason are very painfully troubled and may in their hearts be longing to have a little wisdom so as to understand better why God is allowing them to suffer in the way that they do.

[10 : 19] Well let's turn to the text. I'd like to draw three points from it. First of all from verses 1 to 11 we see a valuable treasure and a demanding quest for it.

a valuable treasure and a demanding quest for it. In verses 1 to 11 there are two themes interwoven. On the one hand the first theme is that we have an object of great value but the second theme is that there is a quest of great difficulty and great cost in order to obtain the thing of great value.

So the passage says to us think about the miner. His task is very difficult and very dangerous but it's worth it because the objects of his search are of such great value.

Now this is a the whole chapter is a terrific piece of poetry and the effect it has on the reader is to draw him or her into the search into this quest. The valuable treasures of mining are laid out before us.

So look with me at verse 1 where we have silver and gold then we have iron and copper in verse 2 and then in verse 6 we have sapphires and gold dust.

[11 : 33] But the demanding quest is also hinted at even in verses 1 and 2 because in verse 1 you see the gold has to be refined and in verse 2 the copper has to be smelted from the ore so you begin to picture the furnace and the sweating grimy bodies of the labourers who do the smelting.

Then in verse 3 we have the miner searching deep underground. Phrases like the farthest limit and deep darkness hint at the dangers of tunnel collapse and rock fall.

Then in verse 4 look what the miner does there. He opens a shaft in a valley away from where anyone lives and then later in the verse that's the miners they hang in the air far away from mankind they swing to and fro presumably on ropes as they let themselves down into the shaft.

Who wants to go swinging and hanging down a mine shaft? Bob are your days of swinging and hanging down mine shafts over? I thought they were so a mine. There's danger here isn't there?

Great toughness is required if in the words of verse 9 the miner has to put his hand that's a violent word to assault the flinty rock and to overturn the mountain by the roots.

[12 : 49] So why has God made these valuable lovely metals so hard to find? Why are miners required to engage in such a challenging and demanding quest?

Might there be a parallel here with what Job so badly needs? Job has already said back in chapter 23 if only I knew where to find God if only I could go to his dwelling place.

You see Job is not only suffering he's also desperately searching for an answer to the question why should I an innocent believer be going through all this?

So this poem about mining in verses 1 to 11 is not an end in itself it sets us up for a different kind of search that begins in verse 12.

The search for precious metal and valuable gems is a search in the natural domain but the search that begins in verse 12 is a search in the cosmic domain and that is the search for wisdom.

[13 : 55] So what is this wisdom spoken of in verses 12 and 20? What does the Old Testament mean by the word wisdom? Well let me say first that it's the same thing as understanding.

So when verse 12 asks but where shall wisdom be found and where is the place of understanding it's not asking two different questions about two different things it's simply repeating the same question in a slightly different form.

Let me give you another Old Testament verse which holds wisdom and understanding together in the same way. This is Proverbs 3 verse 19. The Lord by wisdom founded the earth by understanding he established the heavens.

So wisdom and understanding are parallels they're the same entity. Now I think we could define wisdom in the Old Testament like this as the fundamental order according to which the universe is constructed.

Now even if you are like me in being largely ignorant of astronomy and geology and entirely ignorant of Newtonian and Einsteinian physics you'll still be aware as I am that the vast universe is an amazing construction.

[15 : 12] delicately and wonderfully balanced and poised and governed by scientific laws which continue to amaze our scientists as they continue to unravel them today.

But wisdom in the Old Testament is not just about the material structure of the universe though of course it includes that. It's also about the moral and spiritual structure of the universe.

The Bible is undergirded by the strong conviction that the universe is not chaotic, not random but is built and run according to a majestic structure and order both materially, morally and spiritually.

And this is why Job is so desperately searching. As a believer he is clinging firm to his conviction that there is purpose, there is order in the universe but his sufferings are threatening to drive a coach and horses through his convictions.

That's why he cries out in verse 12, where can wisdom be found? He's saying, I believe that the universe is ordered according to God's great and good and wise purpose but I cannot see how God's good purpose is being expressed by my innocent and undeserved sufferings.

[16 : 29] So let's move now to our second point. In our first point about searching down the mine, we saw a valuable treasure and a demanding quest for it.

Now our second point is that in our search for wisdom, we have from verses 12 to 22, a priceless treasure and an impossible quest for it.

Impossible. Does your heart sink a bit at that word? Let me show you what I mean. Look with me at verse 13. Man does not know its worth and it is not found.

This is wisdom. It is not found or indeed it cannot be found in the land of the living. It is not available. Now this section of the chapter spells out just how much it is to be desired, how enormously valuable it is.

In fact, its worth is so great, verse 13, that man does not know or comprehend how valuable it is. Verse 15 makes the point that it is so valuable that no amount of gold or silver can buy it.

[17 : 42] Look at verse 15. It cannot be bought for gold and silver cannot be weighed as its price. If you had all the gold in the vaults of the Bank of England, you wouldn't be wealthy enough to buy it.

Bill Gates cannot buy wisdom. The richest man in the world is powerless to get hold of it by money. And yet this section of chapter 28 is showing us how wonderfully valuable it is.

Verse 18, coral and crystal and pearls are trash compared with it. Or verse 19, the finest topaz and the purest gold are rubbish by comparison, Job is saying.

And yet isn't it something to be desired? If we, if you and I could only understand the principles that hold the universe together, if we only had a clear grasp, as God does, of how men and women should live, how we should relate to each other, how we should sort out our problems, not just on the personal level, but nationally and internationally, if only Mr.

Bush and Mr. Blair could have access to the wisdom that brought the universe into being, wouldn't things be different? And more particularly, if only Job and his fellow sufferers of today could understand the part played by their sufferings in God's great purposes, then this agonized question of why would be answered.

[19 : 09] If only we could have a second helping of wisdom. I rather enjoy second helpings, don't you? The problem is we haven't even had a first helping.

That's what chapter 28 is saying, not even a first. First, this chapter is telling us, in poetic imagery, that the quest for this priceless thing is impossible. Look at verse 14.

Verse 14 takes us on to a journey. We're in a diving bell here, or perhaps a submarine, and we go a thousand feet down, maybe ten thousand feet down, and we're looking for wisdom. And we ask the deep sea, do you know where wisdom is?

Surely you know, you've been here such a long time. But all the sea can give you is a blank look. Sorry, friend. Can't help. Wisdom is not with me. Alright, let's try another avenue.

Let's be very daring. Verse 22. And we'll ask abaddon and death, or death and destruction. So in verse 22, we go to them. Surely they're know-alls. They've been active for such a long time.

[20 : 12] But all they can say is, there's been a rumour of it. Yes, there was a rumour down here once that such a thing as wisdom existed, but we had it third-hand from somebody who'd had it forth-hand from the postman's sister-in-law.

We've really no idea. So what is chapter 28 doing to us? It's forcing us to be very thoughtful. We're caught up in Job's awful struggle to understand his sufferings.

Is Job right in his longing to understand? Well, he must be. Surely it's right that we should search to grasp the principles that hold the universe together. There's no greater goal for the human seeker.

But is Job's search doomed to failure? Our passage is telling us that it is. Our passage tells us that for all his seeking, Job will never have this wisdom.

For verse 13 tells us that it cannot be found in the land of the living. And verse 23 tells us that God alone knows where it dwells.

[21 : 16] So we have a priceless treasure but an impossible quest for it. However, and here's our third point from verses 23 to 28.

We now see an unexpected and humbling answer to our dilemma. Twice, in verse 12 and verse 20, Job has asked where can wisdom be found?

But in a sense he answers his own question in verses 23 and 4. God understands, God alone, that's the force of it, God alone understands the way to it and he alone knows its place.

For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. So what is happening here? We are not told the location of wisdom.

But in verse 23, our eyes are directed to the one who alone knows where it dwells. And verses 25, 26 and 27 tell us more about the Lord and wisdom.

[22 : 22] In fact, verses 25 and 6 give us a peep at God's power as the creator. Here's 25 and 6. When he gave to the wind its weight and apportioned the waters by measure, when he made a decree for the rain and a way for the lightning of the thunder.

Now there's something, friends, to make our jaws drop open. We have two verses here all about the weather. I wonder if you enjoy the weather forecasts on the television and the radio.

I listen to them with great interest. And now here we have Rob McElwee with today's weather prospects. Hello everyone and a very good morning to you all. Today it could be a day for raincoats for some of you.

It could be shirt sleeves and sunshine for others. There's a prospect of dense fog in the Vale of York and yet those living up on the Murray Firth might have ten hours of sunshine. We've all heard and enjoyed that kind of thing.

Now the forecasters quite often get it right but even with all their satellites and their supercomputerised systems they quite often get it wrong as well.

[23 : 25] Predicting the weather is a formidably difficult task even for 21st century man. So Rob McElwee and his colleagues often have egg on their faces the day after.

Even though they perhaps wouldn't admit it. But the weather doesn't catch God out because he has wisdom. Verse 25.

It's he who gave the weight to the wind. So when a force ten gale hits the seafront at Clandidno it might surprise Rob McElwee but it doesn't surprise the Lord because he was the one who decided how hard the wind would blow.

And when the rain falls, verse 26, it was God who decreed it. A Glaswegian is blessed with 42 inches of rain every year.

And it was the Lord who decreed it. Now the point of verses 25, 6 and 7 is that when the Lord made all these decisions about the weather from his position as the creator, he was using what?

[24 : 35] Verse 27. It was then that he saw it and declared it, established it and searched it out. And that pronoun of course refers to wisdom.

What man cannot know for all his clever technology, God knows perfectly. And of course man lacks wisdom because as verse 23 puts it, it's only God who knows where it dwells.

Now as we read verses 25, 6 and 7, our hopes are perhaps raised a little bit. Verse 27 shows God looking at wisdom, seeing it, declaring it, establishing it, searching it out.

It's as though he's looking here at a wonderful jewel. And we might think perhaps he is now going to show us how to find it. Perhaps he's going to enable us to grasp wisdom and have some of our agonized questions about suffering answered.

But that's not what we find in verse 28. We've been listening to the sea back in verse 14. That didn't have much to say. We've even gone to death and destruction in verse 22 and listened to them.

[25 : 49] But now, finally, we must listen to the voice of God. This is the first time in the book of Job that God has said one word since the opening two chapters.

And you'll see in verse 28 that he's speaking here, not privately to Job, but to all of mankind. Verse 28. And he said to man, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom.

And to turn away from evil is understanding. And that is the verse that brings the humbling and unexpected answer to our dilemma.

What the whole chapter is saying is that wisdom at one level, we might call it wisdom with a capital W, is not available to man. And we must simply accept that.

That's the reality. The wisdom that structured the universe, the wisdom that decided to create the galaxies, the wisdom that established the wind and the water and the thunderstorm, and the wisdom that permitted Satan to torment and afflict Job, is beyond our grasp.

[26 : 59] And God intends it to remain that way. He alone, verse 23, knows where that dwells. But there is a wisdom of a different kind. Wisdom, if you like, with a small W.

And that is ours to use, and in fact God commands us here to use it. And that is remarkably, verse 28, to fear the Lord and to turn away from evil.

And that is precisely what Job was doing back in chapter 1, verse 1, before his sufferings began. So what is chapter 28 teaching us to focus on?

It's saying to us, don't keep asking your pained why questions. Why my pain? Why my suffering? The answers to those questions belong to the wisdom to which we have no access.

Instead of seeking answers to your questions, the chapter is saying, seek God, the Lord. Fear him and turn away from evil. You can do that just as well in a wheelchair as you can in vigorous health and well-being.

[28 : 10] Verse 28 is not addressed only to healthy, carefree human beings. It is addressed to all mankind. So friends, let's be like Job.

He's here in the Bible as an example for us to follow. Even in his sufferings, even in his terrible pain and perplexity, he clings to God. He turns to God, not away from God.

He learns, and he's going to learn even more as the book draws to a close, that what is paramount is not his questions nor the answers to them, but God himself.

In continuing to fear the Lord and to turn away from evil even in the midst of his sufferings, he is doing the right thing. And friends, you and I can do the same.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. We do thank you, dear Heavenly Father, so much for what you taught Job and for what, through his pain and trauma, you have taught to so many believers over the generations.

[29 : 30] and we do pray that you will write these words on our hearts so that we can learn more deeply day by day, week by week and year by year to fear you and to put our backs to everything we know to be wrong and idolatrous.

Help us to love you, therefore, and to cling to you. And please, dear Father, write the lessons of this book of Job so deeply upon our hearts that when the suffering and the awful trauma comes to us.

We may instinctively turn to you and cling to you and trust you. And we ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.