

First Presbyterian Church
Job 28:1-28, “Where is Wisdom?”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 10/24/2021

In chapter 1, Job was prosperous.

In chapters 1 and 2, Job suffered terrible testing, but remained faithful.

In chapter 2 and Job’s friends came and sat with him.

In chapter 3 Job cursed the day of his birth.

In chapters 4-27, Job’s friends pointed fingers and laid blame. But Job resisted and maintained his innocence, seeking to make his case before God.

In chapter 28 we find a distinct shift in tone, focus, language, and form.

Many possible explanations for this shift are suggested among commentators,
but I find the strongest option is that this is an interlude
written by the author of Job or a later editor
which breaks into the dialogue between Job
and his friends just as things have bogged down,
and before the final statements are made.

So the speaker in this interlude is neither Job nor one of his friends, nor the Lord,
but rather an outside voice which is bringing
some much needed perspective to the story.

The interlude is focused on wisdom. Twice there is the refrain,
“Where is wisdom found?” (v. 12, v. 20)
and then wisdom is mentioned again in the final line in v. 28,
“The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom.”

First section considers all that humans do to expose hidden gems.

They put an end to darkness by bringing torches and light into caves.

They dig out mineshafts far from where people live.

In remote areas they “dangle and sway” – imagine it! – as they explore
these caverns and search for precious ore and stone.

All of this shows the great technological prowess of humanity in ancient times.

We are the only creatures who dig into rock

and bring out gemstones, silver, and gold.

We dig down where the pressure is great – as v. 5 suggests quite accurately,
where the earth is transformed from below as by fire.

What other animal does this?

In verses 7-8 the interlude states “no bird of prey knows that hidden path,
no falcon’s eye has seen it.”

These birds soar high above and have great knowledge
of geography by virtue of their elevated perspective
and keen eyesight.

But birds can’t tell where to find these gems.

And neither do the great beasts such as lions.

They have strength that far exceeds human strength,
but you won’t find a lion down in these mineshafts.

It’s humans who search through the mountains,
turning them over, tunnelling beneath, all in an effort (from v. 11)
“to bring hidden things to light.”

Bring hidden things to light.

Sound almost like uncovering a mystery or illuminating a long-forgotten secret.

It sounds *almost* like that, so it’s fitting that in v. 12
the speaker goes beyond searching for gold and crystals
and asks if humans can also find
an even more profoundly hidden treasure:
“But where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell?”

We can send people to the moon, we can land a satellite on an asteroid,
and one day we’ll send someone to Mars,
but can we point our children in the direction of what is wise?

We can grow the stock market, we can create the world wide web,
we can access the knowledge of the world from computers in our pockets,
but can we identify the wisdom to use these things
for the flourishing of creation?

We can find the Higgs-Boson particle and explore the mysteries of neutrinos
by spinning atoms in the large Hadron collider,
but where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell?

Verse 13 begins the second section of this interlude,
and it answers from the perspective of all that humanity searches out:
Wisdom cannot be found in the land of the living,
it's not in the ocean deep,
it cannot be bought with any precious metal or stone
nor the Crown Jewels of England.
You can't trade for it with a Faberge Egg or a lost Picasso,
you cannot buy it for any price at all.

This second section builds to the same question as the first, and we read in v. 20,
“Where then does wisdom come from? Where does understanding dwell?”

It may be that this is the heart of what the book of Job is getting at.
While it has much to say about suffering and the goodness of God,
about the way of faith in the midst of immense tragedy,
all of this is can be brought under a larger umbrella of
living with a heart of wisdom rather than foolishness.

Jobs friends represent astute foolishness, if you will. They have a lot of knowledge,
they know the right answers, but they don't demonstrate wisdom
when applying this knowledge to the case of Job's suffering.

Instead, they rely on a rigid framework of retribution theology.
This is the idea that God rewards good behavior and punishes bad behavior.

We see many examples of this in the book of Proverbs:
Proverbs 3:9-10 says, “Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits
of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will
brim over with new wine.”

Proverbs 16:7 says, “When the Lord takes pleasure in anyone's way, he
causes their enemies to make peace with them.”

For those who turn away from God, Proverbs 17:11 reads, “Evildoers foster
rebellion against God; the messenger of death will be sent against them.”

Job's friends appear to have taken these Proverbs to heart and then calcified them
into an unrelenting explanation of how things work in the world.
God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked – *that's what the Bible says!*

Well, yes. And there is truth in these Proverbs.

But each of these Proverbs needs to be read alongside *other* Proverbs which bring into view a balancing truth.

For instance, Proverbs 24:15-16 suggests that bad things *do* happen to the righteous:

“Do not lurk like a thief near the house of the righteous,
do not plunder their dwelling place,
for though the righteous fall seven times,
they will rise again.”

Lindsay Wilson notes English proverbs that also balance each other out:

“Many hands make light work,” and yet, “Too many cooks spoil the broth.”
“Look before you leap,” and yet, “He who hesitates is lost.”

The wise person is able to see the truth in the fullness of human experience,
to see how God is present in both good times and bad,
and to recognize that God’s ways go far beyond mere retribution
and reward.

But Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar won’t bring such nuance into their theology
even in the face of their friend, Job, known to be blameless and upright,
who has suffered so terribly.

Job’s friends can search out many hidden gems in Scripture,
but they still haven’t found true wisdom.

The final section of this chapter charts a way forward.

In verses 21-24, this speaker describes how impossible it is
for humans to find wisdom on their own,
and that God alone knows where wisdom dwells.

If we read carefully in the final verses,
we find that the path to wisdom was hidden away
(almost like it were a gemstone!) at the time of creation:

**“When God made a decree for the rain and a path for the thunderstorm,
then he looked at wisdom and appraised it; he confirmed it and tested it.
And he said to the human race,
‘The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom,
and to shun evil is understanding.’**

If you want wisdom, it begins with your attitude
and posture before the Living God!

Fearing the Lord is not *being afraid* of the Lord, but rather recognizing
that there is a God, and I am not it.

Additionally, this line in Job is a literary reference to the book of Proverbs.
This phrase from Job 28:28, “The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom,”
is very close to what appears in Proverbs 1:7,
“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

It seems to me that this interlude (and really the whole book of Job!)
is pushing back on those who apply retribution theology in a totalizing,
unnuanced manner.

It’s suggesting that they may have some things right from the book of Proverbs,
but they have forgotten the most important thing:
Wisdom emerges from our relationship with God!

It’s only *after* we have passed through the gateway which read,
“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,”
and *after* we have taken that posture of reverence and humility
toward God into our souls that we will be able to apply
the gems of the Proverbs in ways that are truly wise.

The story of Job shows the dangers of
thinking we are so smart, we are so clever, we can find out so many things
about God and about the Bible and philosophy,
we can do amazing things with technology and intelligence,
and because of all that
we don’t need to engage with God directly,
we can tell you what God thinks all on our own.
Just let me show you all the books I’ve read on the topic.

We see this again and again from people in the church
who think they are speaking for God.
 AIDS is a punishment for sexual sin.
 Cancer is a result of lacking faith.
 Heart disease is a result of gluttony.
 Covid Vaccines are a plot to remove our freedom.
 Republicans are trying to create Fascism.
Earthquakes and tsunamis are God's judgment on immorality.
 Rape is a product of seductive clothing/behavior.
 If parents would just make their kids go to church,
 then we wouldn't have all these drug problems,
 depression and school shootings.

These perspectives are not ancient history – this the way people really talk!

In the words of our savior Jesus, “Do not judge, lest you be judged.”

This interlude from Job is cautioning us all:
 before we go out and blame the victim,
 let us first remember that none of us have wisdom
 that comes from our own intelligence or effort.

Wisdom that results in life well lived is a gift from God
 which begins with the fear of God and grows over a lifetime.

So let us consider our most treasured opinions,
 our hot takes and most-liked social media posts,
 let us bring our cable-news heroes who dehumanize the “other side,”
 and our sense of superiority that we know how to solve it all,
 let us take all these things and place them before the God of All Creation.

Now, let us in humility pray to our God who loves us,
“You, Lord, are the One who knows.
 You alone can judge, you alone are proved right.
Keep us from arrogance and looking down at others,
 and show us life centered in your lovingkindness.
 Lead us in the way everlasting, and if you please,
 make our lives a light for others.
 Amen.”