

Job: Where Can Wisdom be Found?

Job 28

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There is a hymn, the second verse of which goes like this:

He formed the stars, those heavenly flames,
He counts their numbers, calls their names;
His wisdom's vast, and knows no bound,
A deep where all our thoughts are drowned.

This is Isaac Watts' attempt to render a part of Psalm 147 into verse. "His wisdom's vast, and knows no bounds..." is the theme of one particular chapter in Job which we now consider; but effectively, it is the theme of the entire Book of Job.

Where can wisdom be found? It is an important question at any time, but to a man who feels that life is unfair and justice hard to get, this cry seems all the more poignant. The chapter has all the look and feel of a poem about it, written perhaps independently of the flow of debate between Job and his friends. One fine commentary on Job, for example, calls this chapter "*Interlude*." It seems to be what we might call a "time-out" reflection on the nature and sources of wisdom. Job's friends have run out of steam. Their voices, bitter and biting as they have been, have now fallen silent. Job is left to himself to reflect and ponder on one of the great themes of life. And his conclusion? That wisdom is to be found in the fear of the Lord. The full text is worth citing for it encapsulates the message of the Book of Job in one verse!

The fear of the Lord is that is wisdom,
And to shun evil is understanding. (Job 28:28)

This had been Job's understanding of the way life is to be lived, but it had got him into deep trouble. That is why in the opening verses of the next chapter we find him longing for the days when this rule of life seemed to bring God's discernible blessing. It all seems to have gone terribly wrong. His understanding of the way God works in this world seems to have been turned upside down. The world is his life, *God's providence* doesn't seem to make any sense!

What can we expect if we commit ourselves to a life of godliness? If we "shun evil" as Job has been doing, and is determined to continue so doing, what then? Job's friends have a ready answer: righteousness leads to a life that is free from these outward discomforts of suffering. Pain is invariably punishment for disobedience. But Job is discovering that the wisdom of God is more complicated than that. Neat, packaged solutions which the counselors offered are woefully inadequate as an explanation for all of life's issues. And what Job comes to appreciate here is appreciate in his head rather than his heart is one of the most profound things we can ever discover. It is a key to life itself is the life of God within the soul of man. It will take a few chapters, and a revelation of God, to move Job's heart into submission; but right here in chapter 28, Job begins to understand what the real issue is all about.

And understanding is the first step to discipleship. It all boils down to what we *think*. Our mind matters. Our world-and-life view, as the expression goes, commits us to a certain way of life. It's time for Job to sit and ponder the ultimate realities of wisdom and God and pain and life in this world.

The Search for Wisdom

...where can wisdom be found?
Where does understanding dwell? (Job 28:12)

Does life have any meaning? Or is life, after all, meaningless? For all the effort and labour we put into it, we are all of us, rich and poor alike, subject to the Great Leveller's that moment when we are marched off to meet death, "the king of terrors" (Job 18:14). Einstein, Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Beethoven... it doesn't matter who are, or what we have been, this is what awaits us all.

So is the perspective of the preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes right whenever he characterizes life, at least from one perspective, as "Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is Meaningless!" (Ecc. 12:8)? Is there really no meaning to life. Is the skeptic right, after all? Life is basically unfair. There is no order, no structure, no universal law, no truth. You live and then you die, so you had better make the most of it. It's each man for himself. You may show kindness and love but in the end it will make no difference. This is how it is:

In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these:
A righteous man perishing in his righteousness,
And a wicked man living long in his wickedness. (Job 7:15)

And Epicureas was right. Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die. As Robert Herrick put it:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying
And this same flower that smiles to day
To-morrow will be dying.

Job is not prepared to accept that life is meaningless. That is what he means whenever he says in 27:6, "I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live." That sounds terribly self-righteous, doesn't it? We would be tempted to say, "No one is perfect, not even you, Job!" But, tempting as this may be, that would be to misunderstand this book, and capitulate to the theological world-view of Job's friends. Job does indeed have a god case; God has told us so. Job is not about to turn his understanding of the world and the way God works in creation and grace upside-down just because his friends keep insisting that he is wrong. There is wisdom somewhere, but where?

Job imagines a mining expedition. The opening verses of this chapter give us a fascinating glimpse into ancient mining techniques. It describes the way silver and gold and precious gems are extracted from the depths of the earth where no creature apart from man has ever seen (28:1-11). Things regarded as precious have a source that can be accessed, even if it involves great pain and arduous struggle. They may not yield their beauty easily, but they are obtainable. The ancients could dig great tunnels deep into the surface of the earth, but finding wisdom is another thing entirely. Where can I find it?

Can it be bought? Can I write a check and get wisdom? Can I sign up for a course at one of the world's greatest universities and get wisdom? Yes, to some degree, that is possible. And yet, as the preacher complains in Ecclesiastes, the intelligent are also destitute of true wisdom. They may have intellectual knowledge, but they are unhappy. They fail to find the source of all true meaning and purpose.

I devoted myself to study and to explore
By wisdom all that is done under heaven...
All of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (Ecc. 1:13-14).

One of the most disturbing features of almost any modern university where the brightest students are found, is that there you will also observe some of the most offensive and hope-less graffiti.

Man does not comprehend its worth;
it cannot be found in the land of the living.
The deep says, 'It is not in me';
the sea says, 'It is not with me.'
It cannot be bought with the finest gold,
Nor can its price be weighed in silver.

It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing,
concealed even from the birds of the air. (28:13-15).

For all of man's achievements and abilities, he cannot answer Job's great question about the meaning and purpose of righteous man who suffers. Nothing in this world can explain that. The answer to life's great questions cannot be discerned by man alone. He may fly to the moon, and explore the double-helix structure of DNA and map the human genome; he may compose a sublime symphony like Beethoven's Ninth or Mahler's Ninth; he may write poetry like Keats or Shelley; he may paint like Rembrandt or Titian; but, can he find out wisdoms the kind of wisdom that speaks of ultimate truth and reality? The answer is negative. He cannot find out the wisdom of God.

The answer is not completely negative. There is a "rumor" of wisdom that is discernible in this world (cf. 28:22). The world reflects something of the wisdom of God. But Job is concerned about something deeper than that. And what he says is this:

God understands the way to it
and he alone knows where it dwells,
for he views the ends of the earth
and sees everything under the heavens... (Job 28:23-24)

God Alone is a Fit Witness to Himself

It was Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315-368) who once wrote, "God alone is a fit witness to Himself." No one apart from God himself can give us reliable information about Gods who He is and what he does. Apart from divine revelation, there can be no true and certain knowledge. This, of course, is exacerbated by man's Fall. Sin has darkened the understanding (Eph. 4:18; Rom. 3:11). But, this is not Job's point here. He is pleading his righteousness it is, of course, a righteousness of God. But his point is not that he needs a Savior, but rather, someone who will interpret to him the answers to his dilemma. And whilst sin does pose a massive problem in our capacity to understand the ways of God in this world, there is another problem: our creatureliness. And he has come to the point where he tells us that God alone is able to provide this. He will have more to say about this later in chapter 38 and 39, and there, God will speak to him and reveal himself to him.

Job's conclusion, then, is typical of what all the wisdom books say: it is to *fear God!*

"The fear of the Lords that is wisdom,
and to shun evil is understanding." (Job 28:28)

It is exactly what the Book of Proverbs says (Prov. 1:7; 9:10; c.f. Psa. 111:10).

And it provides the conclusion to the Book of Ecclesiastes:

Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the whole of man. (Job 12:13)

Reverence! That's the issue! Whether or not we hold God and His ways in awe. That is what really matters. God is sovereign and Job must learn to bow before that sovereignty. In chapters 38 and 39 Job will be taught that in effect he knows nothing at all in comparison with what God knows. How can he possibly expect to understand what God is doing in his life right now! It's an issue of discipleship. There is a wisdom in a raindrop, Job is saying, that we cannot begin to understand (28:25-27). We must learn to exclaim: "O the depths..." whenever we think of God and His providence in our lives.

But it is more than that. There is something here that Job could but faintly see, if at all. In a sense his faith at this point is magnificent, for we balk when far greater insights into the wisdom of God are given to us. The fear of God is not terror; it is the opposite of terror. It is a willingness to bow and say: "Whatever the Lord does is right." But there is every incentive for God's people to say that, because God's wisdom has been revealed to us in personal terms. God has revealed Himself to us in His own Son, Jesus Christ. He is the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24). He tells us things about God that otherwise we would never know. He tells us that God loves us with a love that is beyond our grasp. He tells us that God's covenant is certain of fulfillment, that his word cannot be broken. We look to Jesus, and all that he has done on behalf of sinners, and we say: God's commitment to my glorification. He will not rest until it is done. In some ways, our response of fear of God is a response of a child who knows that his Father loves him even if he cannot fathom what his Father may be doing at any given moment. As Sinclair Ferguson has put it:

The fear of God defies our attempts at definition, because it is really another way of saying 'knowing God'. It is a heart-felt love for him because of who he is and what he has done; a sense of being in his majestic presence. It is a thrilling awareness that we have this greatest of all privileges, mingled with a realization that now the only thing that really matters is His opinion. To have the assurance of His smile is everything; to feel that He frowns on what we do is desolation. To fear God is to be sensitive to both his greatness and his graciousness. It is to know Him and to love Him wholeheartedly and unreservedly.

Looking to Jesus Christ is the mirror by which we see the assurance of God's providential kindness to us even when we are in the dark. Job had glimpsed it in chapter 19 whenever he had said that he knew that his Redeemer lived. It was his ultimate sanity in a situation which threatened it.

Wisdom will only come as we trust Him this way. Understanding will only flower as we walk in his ways. It will not come to us through bitterness, or bickering; but through acquiescence and agreement, even when we cannot see it.

Whenever the Mars Space Project was launched in 1999, scientists were confident of success. But the space probe burned up in the Martian atmosphere. The reason? American and European scientists failed to synchronize to the same unit of measurement. Part of the software was reading in feet and inches, part in millimeters and centimeters. This failure to measure using the same system caused catastrophe. So it is whenever we attempt to measure providence by a different standard to that which God uses. The result will always be tragedy. We need, as Job expresses so wonderfully here, to see things from the perspective the Lord Himself provides. Then, and only then, will there be peace in our hearts.

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