

“The Fear of the Lord—That Is Wisdom”

Texts: Job 28:1-31:40; Romans 11:33-36

The heated argument between Job and his three friends has come to a halt. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar have been unable to convince their suffering friend that the reason why he has lost his family, health, and possessions is because he has sinned and needs to repent. Indeed, Job refuses to budge from his conviction that he has done nothing whatsoever to bring God’s judgment down upon him. We have also witnessed Job’s faith and hope slowly but surely begin to grow, even while his friends accuse him of all kinds of sin which he has not committed and even though his friends are convinced that he’s become nothing but a “belly wind.” After three cycles of speeches, Job’s friends have been finally silenced. The sufferer now assumes the role of teacher. Repeatedly defending his good name and crying out for God to vindicate him, this time Job almost goes too far. But before he can do so, he is silenced. Job will get what he asks for—an audience with God. He will get a lesson in the mysteries of God’s providence which will put everything in perspective.

We now come to that section in the Book of Job (chapters 28-31) where Job looks back on the days before he lost everything, contrasting the joy of days past with his present misery. Job will make yet another impassioned defense of his personal honor, again insisting that he be vindicated by God.¹ Apparently, all of the speeches and Job’s replies, as well as Job’s closing speech, are overheard by a crowd of onlookers, one of whom, Elihu, will speak his mind in Job 32-37. Elihu agrees with Job, that his three friends have widely missed the mark. But Elihu will also assert that Job has erred by insisting upon vindicating himself, when instead he should have sought to vindicate God. The speech from Elihu in turn sets the stage for what follows in Job 38-40:2, when the Lord speaks to Job, giving him the very thing he’s been demanding—an answer to the mystery of providence and the suffering of the righteous. When God speaks, all the participants fall silent. The Lord will have the final word.

Recall that the main argument raised by Job’s three friends was this simple syllogism: God is holy. God must punish all sin. Job is being punished. Therefore, Job must have sinned. This simplistic solution is repeated over and over again by his friends and is designed to encourage Job to come clean and repent of his sins so that God can then restore him. His friends are increasingly frustrated because Job will not admit what they think to be obvious—the wicked live miserable and short lives. Since Job is sick and suffering, the conclusion is obvious—he too must be wicked. While Job never denies that this argument contains some degree of truth, the fact of the matter is not only do the wicked prosper for a time, but the righteous may suffer for a season. But the primary reason for Job’s indignation is that none of these arguments apply to him. Job is a justified sinner, whose faith in God’s promise to save him from his sins is manifest through his fear of God, his shunning of evil, and in his blameless and upright behavior. Job knows that he has done nothing to provoke God to respond to him in judgment. The retributive principle of God’s justice, as understood by his friends is not only wrong, it surely does not apply to him.

Job knows that God is sovereign and Job has no doubt that God can do whatever he wishes. The question is not whether God can do as he pleases, but why God has allowed an upright and blameless

¹ Andersen, *Job*, p. 230.

man like Job to suffer. If God is as good as Job believes him to be, then God must vindicate Job in the end. This is why Job is not at all satisfied with the wooden application of the principle of divine retribution offered by his friends. Slowly but surely Job is beginning to realize that what he needs is a heavenly mediator and redeemer who will intercede before God on his behalf. While Job dismisses the theological errors of his friends—not to mention the self-righteous and cruel way in which such counsel was offered—Job begins to “think out loud” about the mysteries of divine providence. On the one hand, Job offers a stirring confession of faith in 19:23-27, “*I know my redeemer lives,*” while on the other, he turns around and claims in 27:2 that God “*has denied me justice.*” Job knows he is innocent. But he cannot yet fathom the mysteries of God. In the midst of his pain and humiliation, he boldly professes his faith and yet demands an answer as to why God seems so far away. Job will get one.

Last time we covered the first two chapters of Job’s closing speech in chapters 26-27, which serves as Job’s reply to the final speech from Bildad, as well as to all three cycles of speeches. We continue with Job’s closing discourse, picking up where we left off last time. In chapter 28, Job now turns to the theme of God’s wisdom, which is in many ways a continuation of Job’s comments offered 27:11 when he declared, “*I will teach you about the power of God; the ways of the Almighty I will not conceal.*”² The sufferer has become the teacher and the seeker of divine wisdom.

Throughout this entire discourse Job’s true piety and deep spiritual fervor are readily apparent, even though his friends cannot see it because they are offended when Job does not agree with them.³ Now that the debate is over and nothing is settled, Job begins to explore the question, “where can true wisdom be found?” He knows that his three friends don’t have such wisdom! They can’t even explain why wicked people prosper or why the righteous suffer. This lack of wisdom can be seen in Bildad’s final speech in chapter 25, when, out of a sense of frustration, he told Job that men are nothing but maggots (Job 25:6). While men and women are indeed sinful, the fact that men and women are still divine image-bearers requires that Job embrace a higher view of human nature (a “wiser” view). We have been created but a little bit lower than the angels. Yes, Job knows that men and women are sinful. He also knows that men and women are not maggots. It takes divine wisdom to move beyond the faulty views of his friends.

The quest for such wisdom now occupies Job’s full attention. In the first 11 verses of Job 28, Job expresses his deep admiration for those who mine the earth seeking its buried treasures.⁴ Job does this not because he is interested in mining, but to make a point about wisdom. Says Job, “*there is a mine for silver and a place where gold is refined. Iron is taken from the earth, and copper is smelted from ore. Man puts an end to the darkness; he searches the farthest recesses for ore in the blackest darkness. Far from where people dwell he cuts a shaft, in places forgotten by the foot of man; far from men he dangles and sways. The earth, from which food comes, is transformed below as by fire; sapphires come from its rocks, and its dust contains nuggets of gold. No bird of prey knows that hidden path, no falcon's eye has seen it. Proud beasts do not set foot on it, and no lion prowls there. Man's hand assaults the flinty rock and lays bare the roots of the mountains. He tunnels through the rock; his eyes see all its treasures. He searches the sources of the rivers and brings hidden things to light.*”

² Kline, “Job,” p. 480.

³ Kline, “Job,” p. 480.

⁴ Andersen, *Job*, p. 224.

Despite the ability of the men of Job's age to mine the earth for its great mineral wealth, as stated in verse 12, Job is aware that true wisdom it is not found in the mines of the earth, nor among its creatures. *"But where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell?"* Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar are limited to natural revelation—just like men and women are limited to the earth when searching for precious minerals. While they are ingenious in their quest for wealth, they are limited to the earth. But true wisdom—which comes only from God—cannot be found in riches. Such wisdom cannot be purchased, nor can its depths be plumbed merely through the observation of the earth or of its creatures.

Beginning in verse 13, Job makes his case that divine wisdom is the real treasure men ought to be seeking. *"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 cannot be bought with the gold of Ophir, with precious onyx or sapphires. Neither gold nor crystal can compare with it, nor can it be had for jewels of gold. Coral and jasper are not worthy of mention; the price of wisdom is beyond rubies. The topaz of Cush cannot compare with it; it cannot be bought with pure gold."* Nothing is as valuable as that which God reveals in his word.

Job knows what he needs. He knows what really matters. His suffering has made all quite clear. Thus, in verse 20, he again asks the question, *"where then does wisdom come from? Where does understanding dwell?"* Job knows that only God possesses infinite wisdom. Such wisdom cannot be found in the land of the living or of the dead. Job continues this quest in verse 21, *"It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing, concealed even from the birds of the air. Destruction and Death say, 'Only a rumor of it has reached our ears.' 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. When he established the force of the wind and measured out the waters, when he 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."*

God's wisdom is the foundation of all created things—a theme taken up in Proverbs 8:22-31 where Wisdom is personified in the person of the preincarnate Jesus Christ: *"The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began. When there were no oceans, I was given birth, when there were no springs abounding with water; before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth, before he made the earth or its fields or any of the dust of the world. I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was the craftsman at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind."* While God's wisdom is the foundation for all created things, the content of that wisdom is difficult to specifically identify, since natural revelation is distorted by human sinfulness.

Divine wisdom is therefore most fully revealed in special revelation—God's speeches and acts of redemption. Such wisdom is codified in God's law—particularly in the covenant of works God established with Adam in Eden, the specific terms of which are republished in the Ten Commandments. The realization that true wisdom must be revealed to us by God is, therefore, the place to begin the quest. It is clear that Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar have not discovered true wisdom, based solely upon their observation of the world and the lives of those around them. Having suffered to the degree to which Job has and having heard the best arguments his friends have to offer, Job knows that unless God reveals true wisdom to his people, it will never be fully discovered by mere observation.

Thus Job declares in verse 28, *“The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.”* Everything done apart from such wisdom is only so much vanity. Job now sees this in the bone-headed arguments of his three friends. To seek wisdom apart from God’s self-revelation is to cut one’s self off from the only source of true wisdom. To seek for wisdom through observation of the people around you is like trying to study astronomy without a using telescope. It is not that what you observe is incorrect, it is limited. True wisdom must be sought where God reveals it—in the moral law, which is the foundation of natural law. To fear God—which is to be consecrated to him through God’s covenant promises in the gospel and through their ratification in the sacraments—is the source and chief part of wisdom.⁵

Again, the words of Job, anticipate the words of Paul, this time seen in one of Paul’s doxologies in Romans 11:33-36. *“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! `Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?’ `Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.”* Simply put, to fear God means that we seek wisdom, where God reveals it—in his word—and not by looking within or through personal experience or observation, as Job’s friends have lamely tried to do. For no one has known the mind of the Lord, unless and until God reveals his mind to us in his word. This is what Job seeks.

In Chapters 29-31, we find Job’s final protest as the debate is now over and the stage is being set for Job’s amazing encounter with God which brings this book to a close.

In this final monologue, Job restates and summarizes his case. Throughout, he speaks both to his friends and to God. As one commentator points out, in this discourse Job restates his opening complaint from chapter 3, but this time Job’s words are tempered by having passed through the furnace of the three cycles of debate with his friends.⁶ There are three main points in what follows. In chapter 29, Job recounts the days before his trial by ordeal began. In chapter 30, Job describes his present state, both his suffering and his humiliation. And then in Job 31, Job makes one more impassioned statement of his innocence. Obviously a number of people are listening to Job’s speech, including a certain Elihu.

Chapter 29 of Job is very poignant, given what Job once enjoyed in light of his current suffering. Job’s opening comments about the days in which he enjoyed God’s favor reiterate what was said of Job in the book’s prologue. *“Job continued his discourse: `How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone upon my head and by his light I walked through darkness! Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God’s intimate friendship blessed my house, when the Almighty was still with me and my children were around me, when my path was drenched with cream and the rock poured out for me streams of olive oil.”* We can imagine a nostalgic tone in Job’s voice and tears filling Job’s eyes as he looks back upon his life. He’s lost so much. His suffering is so great.

Given the fact that he now resides on the town dunghill and is an object of the scorn of all his neighbors, what follows beginning in verse 7 is especially moving. *“When I went to the gate of the city and took my seat in the public square, the young men saw me and stepped aside and the old men rose to their feet; the chief men refrained from speaking and covered their mouths with their hands; the voices of the nobles were hushed, and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths. Whoever heard me spoke well of me,*

⁵ Kline, “Job,” p. 480.

⁶ Kline, “Job,” p. 480.

and those who saw me commended me, because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him. The man who was dying blessed me; I made the widow's heart sing." The ultimate humiliation is that children now laugh at Job and people are grossed out by the sight of him.

Job's faith in the God of the promise was clearly manifest in his conduct. In verse 14, Job declares, "*I put on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe and my turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy; I took up the case of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth. . . . Men listened to me expectantly, waiting in silence for my counsel. After I had spoken, they spoke no more; my words fell gently on their ears. They waited for me as for showers and drank in my words as the spring rain. When I smiled at them, they scarcely believed it; the light of my face was precious to them. I chose the way for them and sat as their chief; I dwelt as a king among his troops; I was like one who comforts mourners.*" Job had done none of the things his friends had implied or accused him of doing. He was a blameless and upright man, who feared the Lord and shunned evil. Everyone knew it. The accusations made by his friends, who were trying to stir his conscience so that Job would repent of these supposed "sins," were nothing but cruel lies, and, no doubt, inflicted more pain than the open sores on his skin.

In chapter 30, Job describes his current predicament. The respect, honor and comfort of the past are now gone. That man whom everyone respected is now the lowest of the low—an object of shame and loathing. Says Job in the first 15 verses of chapter 30, "*But now they mock me, men younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to put with my sheep dogs. Of what use was the strength of their hands to me, since their vigor had gone from them? Haggard from want and hunger, they roamed the parched land in desolate wastelands at night. In the brush they gathered salt herbs, and their food was the root of the broom tree. They were banished from their fellow men, shouted at as if they were thieves. They were forced to live in the dry stream beds, among the rocks and in holes in the ground. . . . They detest me and keep their distance; they do not hesitate to spit in my face. Now that God has unstrung my bow and afflicted me, they throw off restraint in my presence. . . . Terrors overwhelm me; my dignity is driven away as by the wind, my safety vanishes like a cloud.*" Men who are regarded like dogs by polite society, now look down on Job. His present predicament and degree of suffering is almost beyond words.

But what is worse, Job feels as though he's been abandoned by God. In verses 16-23, Job cries out, "*and now my life ebbs away; days of suffering grip me. Night pierces my bones; my gnawing pains never rest. In his great power God becomes like clothing to me; he binds me like the neck of my garment. He throws me into the mud, and I am reduced to dust and ashes. I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer; I stand up, but you merely look at me. You turn on me ruthlessly; with the might of your hand you attack me. You snatch me up and drive me before the wind; you toss me about in the storm. I know you will bring me down to death, to the place appointed for all the living.*" Job feels as though God is persecuting him. He also feels as though God has abandoned him during his time of greatest need. But what Job fails to grasp—and which will soon be revealed to him—is that he is on the verge of being guilty of the exact same thing as his three friends—he seeks wisdom through his own experience and observation. Yet we do need to cut Job some slack. As Kline reminds us, "it must be remembered that [Job] was not a man of stone but a man of flesh, and still being crushed by the serpent's coils."⁷

In verses 24-31, Job pours out his heart yet again. The very thought of his former life and his feeling so estranged from God moves Job deeply and he cries out in distress, "*Surely no one lays a hand on a*

⁷ Kline, "Job," p. 481.

broken man when he cries for help in his distress. Have I not wept for those in trouble? Has not my soul grieved for the poor? Yet when I hoped for good, evil came; when I looked for light, then came darkness. The churning inside me never stops; days of suffering confront me. I go about blackened, but not by the sun; I stand up in the assembly and cry for help. I have become a brother of jackals, a companion of owls. My skin grows black and peels; my body burns with fever. My harp is tuned to mourning, and my flute to the sound of wailing." Sick with fever, and now singing the song of mourning, this sad lament probably indicates that Job thinks that his condition is irreversible, that death is at hand.

Despite the humiliation and sickness, what troubles Job the most is that he knows that he is innocent. Stirred deeply, Job again protests his innocence in his final speech. In chapter 31, we have what amounts to an oath of covenant allegiance. In such an oath, the speaker calls down the covenant curses upon himself, if it can be proved that he has violated any of the terms of the covenant. The literary form and style of Job 31 is quite similar to oaths sworn by Hittite soldiers to the effect, that if they failed in their duty (they panicked, they did not keep their ground or advance as ordered), their commander had the right to break their limbs or take their crops or wives. A number of the elements in Job's speech, the destruction of his crops, the breaking of his bones are found in these Hittite treaties.⁸ This not only helps us understand the context of Job's lament, but points out that the Book of Job is historically accurate and quite ancient, coming from the time of Abraham and the patriarchs.

The context for what follows is covenantal, even though Job stands outside of the genealogical line of Abraham and the patriarchs. Job clearly regards himself as the covenant servant of the great king (YHWH). Job is protesting the fact that he has been faithful to all of the stipulations of the covenant and yet he's apparently receiving the covenant curses instead of the covenant blessings.⁹ He cannot understand why this is happening to him. Since it is the great king's covenantal responsibility to keep up his end of the covenant, in this final speech Job is invoking a solemn covenant oath. In other words, Job is demanding that things be made right. He wants his sovereign to honor his covenant agreement.

In the first 8 verses of Job 31, Job flatly denies the kind of secret sins alluded to by his three friends. Says Job, "*I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl. For what is man's lot from God above, his heritage from the Almighty on high? Is it not ruin for the wicked, disaster for those who do wrong? Does he not see my ways and count my every step? `If I have walked in falsehood or my foot has hurried after deceit-let God weigh me in honest scales and he will know that I am blameless-if my steps have turned from the path, if my heart has been led by my eyes, or if my hands have been defiled, then may others eat what I have sown, and may my crops be uprooted.*" This is covenantal language and Job is stating his innocence—not his sinlessness. The tension in Job's thinking is now brought out into the open. Job is terrified of the Lord's approach, while at the same time he is eager for his day in court. This dilemma can only be solved by the presence of a mediator, something Job hinted at earlier in the debate, but now seems to have forgotten.

In verses 9-23, Job appeals to his public conduct—very important if a crowd has gathered and has been listening to the speeches of Job's three friends and Job's responses. His neighbors know first-hand how Job has treated them, as well as his servants and the poor. Job confidently speaks in his defense. "*If my heart has been enticed by a woman, or if I have lurked at my neighbor's door, then may my wife grind*

⁸ Kline, "Job," p. 482.

⁹ Kline, "Job," p. 482.

another man's grain, and may other men sleep with her. For that would have been shameful, a sin to be judged. . . . `If I have denied justice to my menservants and maidservants when they had a grievance against me, what will I do when God confronts me? What will I answer when called to account? Did not he who made me in the womb make them? Did not the same one form us both within our mothers? `If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary, if I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the fatherless-but from my youth I reared him as would a father, and from my birth I guided the widow-if I have seen anyone perishing for lack of clothing, or a needy man without a garment, and his heart did not bless me for warming him with the fleece from my sheep, if I have raised my hand against the fatherless, knowing that I had influence in court, then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint. For I dreaded destruction from God, and for fear of his splendor I could not do such things.” Job’s conscience is clean, which explains why he invokes the covenant curses. He need not fear, if he is innocent. Job is a justified sinner whose conduct is blameless.

Then in verses 24-40, Job denies trusting in his wealth. He denies the hypocrisy of which he has been accused. He has not worshiped pagan “gods” nor has he treated people cruelly. Job needs not fear intense scrutiny of his life. He’s got nothing to hide. *“If I have put my trust in gold or said to pure gold, ‘You are my security,’ if I have rejoiced over my great wealth, the fortune my hands had gained, if I have regarded the sun in its radiance or the moon moving in splendor, so that my heart was secretly enticed and my hand offered them a kiss of homage, then these also would be sins to be judged, for I would have been unfaithful to God on high. `If I have rejoiced at my enemy's misfortune or gloated over the trouble that came to him-I have not allowed my mouth to sin by invoking a curse against his life-if the men of my household have never said, ‘Who has not had his fill of Job's meat?’- but no stranger had to spend the night in the street, for my door was always open to the traveler- if I have concealed my sin as men do, by hiding my guilt in my heart because I so feared the crowd and so dreaded the contempt of the clans that I kept silent and would not go outside. `Oh, that I had someone to hear me! I sign now my defense-let the Almighty answer me; let my accuser put his indictment in writing. Surely I would wear it on my shoulder, I would put it on like a crown. I would give him an account of my every step; like a prince I would approach him.) . . . The words of Job are ended.”*

To make the point that he is innocent to the terms of the covenant, Job demands a written defense. But Job also demands to appear before the Almighty as a Prince. Job may be innocent, but with these last words, something distressing has happened. Job is now thinking only of himself and has completely forgotten his quest for true wisdom. His complaint has become a tirade. He’s on the verge of becoming just like Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar.

Bold and defiant, Job has nearly crossed the line. He now stands before the Lord demanding to be treated like a prince. He is on the brink of self-righteousness. Job has offered a resounding defense of his innocence, something he has every right to do. But he now manifests a degree of arrogance which reflects that he too has much to learn, something which will soon be corrected—which is one of the purposes for the speech of Elihu, which follows in Job 32-37.

Having allowed Job to endure this Satanically-inspired trial by ordeal, God will rescue Job before it is too late. Job has endured so much and has still not blamed God. And so God sends Elihu to interrupt Job before he goes too far. But Elihu’s speech also prepares the way for God to give Job an answer to his question. Thus, it is an act of God’s grace when Job is silenced. When God speaks to Job from the whirlwind as recounted in Job 38-40:2, Job will be reminded of the words which began this speech. *“The fear of the Lord-that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.”* These words are true and right. After the Lord appears to Job, Job will indeed fear God. And then and only then, will Job receive the

answer and vindication he's been seeking! He will fear God, shun evil and then gain that wisdom and understanding he's been so desperately seeking. And because God is good and just, he will indeed vindicate and restore his suffering servant, Job.