

Seek God's wisdom for faith, hope in the darkest hours Formations



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Job is one of five books classified as "wisdom literature," including Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. Rather than a collection of beautiful songs or wise sayings,

Job is a tale of suffering, discovery and faith that overcomes all odds.

Job 28 is a wisdom poem offering true hope in comparison to humanly crafted religious theories. There are three cycles of debate between Job and his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar (chapters 3-31). Their words offer no comfort, instead, accusing Job of sins which God must be punishing. On top of Job's massive losses these three "friends" burden Job with a "god" who keeps a ledger of sins and exacts harsh punishment that even falls on Job's family.

With his wealth gone, his children dead and even his friends heaping guilt on his head, Job declares what he is learning about wisdom (chapter 28). He uses the image of mining for precious metals, a process that involved intense labor, life-threatening activities and delving into the darkness of the underground world. We recognize the obvious value of silver and gold, but iron and copper were equally valuable in terms of military strength and national security. Job describes his loss and despair as "the farthest depths...in utter darkness...a shaft away from any inhabitant...places forgotten by those on foot" (vv. 3-4, Common English Bible).

If you have ever visited a cave or mine in which the guide turned out the lights, you catch the idea of the absolute blackness Job feels in his heart. But Job describes this darkness as the place where true wisdom (precious metals) is to be found. These metals are symbols of wealth and power in the world, but Job is talking about the wisdom that can be found in God, the riches of God's promises and presence.

Job asks: Where can true wisdom be found? How can we understand this wisdom in our world? (vv. 12-13) We struggle to grasp the value of this wisdom, but God knows and understands "her" (v. 23). "Wisdom" was commonly given a feminine identity, a figure of beauty to be desired and cherished (see Proverbs).

There is stark contrast between Job's friends' concept of God and Job's understanding. His friends heap up words of judgment and retribution for his failures. Job describes the God who cannot be reduced to human measurement, the God who "looks to the ends of the earth and surveys everything beneath the heavens"...who weighs the winds, commands rain and thunderbolts...who knows everything! (vv. 24-27) From his miserable pile of ashes and his broken heart, Job says to his accusing friends whose words only deepen his pain, "I do not know this 'god' you are describing."

Once, a woman from out of town who came to church with her family said to me, "The God you preached about this morning is much different than the 'god' I grew up with. He was harsh and judgmental and I was afraid of him!" She had been taught that God's love and grace were only for good little girls.

Frequently, "wisdom" and "understanding" are paired and even synonymous (Proverbs 1:2; 4:5; 9:10; 16:16). According to Job, only the God who is creator of the universe knows the true meaning of wisdom and understanding (vv. 23-24). We may search our world, as do miners for precious metal, but our understanding is limited and often flawed as with Job's friends. Job responds to his friends' misguided and harmful advice by telling them: "Look, the fear of the Lord is wisdom; turning from evil is understanding" (v. 28).

The word "fear" in this verse means the same as in Job 1-2, where Job is described as having reverence for God. The idea is to worship or trust God

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Scripture: Job 28:1-4, 12-13, 23-28

with your life. The more Job listens to his friends' ideas the more he turns to the God they do not understand. He finds their 'god' too small.

If the first truth in knowing God is to "reverence" or "fear" him, the second is to turn from evil and live a life based on God's truth and love: "Turning from evil is understanding" (v. 28). A godly life is not perfect, but is a life that seeks to honor God and draw others to him. Job's friends have not helped him, but as he grieved amidst the ashes of his life and struggled with empty answers common to his day, Job begins to see that tragedy cannot often be explained, that God neither wills nor ignores our suffering, and that faith must be more than earning rewards for performance.

You can learn much from God's creation, but creation cannot be a substitute for God any more than a religious system can. God created us for relationship with him, based not on our ability to perform correctly or construct a clever theology. The universe offers glimpses of the eternal God, but his love and grace are not clearly shown in the mountains and oceans. Job's understanding of God is clarified as he hears his friends' empty words. Their ideas helped dispel Job's limited understanding of God.

Suffering is evil, but you often find your strongest faith and hope in the darkest hours. Pat answers never sustain you. Ultimate hope and strength are found only when you know God is with you. We read this challenging book with our knowledge of Christ. Learn from Job as he discovers the God who loves beyond our ideas and circumstances.

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.