

## **Fourteen**

### **TRUE WISDOM**

We come now to chapter 28. We have been going from one part of the Book of Job to another, jumbling them up, and we could lose a sense of what is happening in the whole book. So it would be good just to look at where we have come to so far. Chapters 1 and 2 tell the story and set the scene. chapters 3–27, where we have done most of our looking, is the dialogue between Job and his three companions. That happens in three rounds: Job speaks, then Eliphaz and Bildad and Zophar each in turn, and Job responds after each one. Chapters 3–14 are round one, chapters 15–21 are round 2, where the same thing happens. In round three, chapters 22–27, only Eliphaz and Bildad speak, and Job responds. Bildad does not have much to say, and Zophar does not speak at all, so round three is rather short. So by the end of chapter 27, we come to the end of the discussion with the three friends. Chapters 29–31 we have looked at: those are the chapters in which Job rests his case. In chapter 29 he talks about his former prosperity, in chapter 30 he talks about his present adversity, in chapter 31 he sets out the denial of whatever accusation has been made against him and his appeal to be judged accordingly.

Before that comes this remarkable chapter 28. It stands on its own, and it is a real treasure. It is a poem on wisdom. I discovered this chapter when I was at school. We had a public speaking prize, and anyone who was game to apply for winning this prize had to front up before the whole school. There were two parts to the competition: first was the reading of a chapter from the Bible—there were a certain number of set chapters that you could choose from to read—and the other was giving a speech on a topic of your choice. Among the set passages was 1 Corinthians 13 on love, and that is what most of the students chose. By the end of the afternoon you were sick of hearing 1 Corinthians 13 seven times! One of the readings listed, that I had never heard before, was Job 28. I read it through, from the old Authorised (King James) Version, and I was stunned. I thought, This is great! I am going to read Job 28. So I stood up before the whole school and read Job 28 from the Authorised Version. I think I did it pretty well! And it had the advantage of coming freshly on the ears of the students. When it came to giving my prepared speech, just before the end of it I went blank, and there was a silence for what seemed like about a minute and a half, so I missed out on the prize. But if it had just been on reading Job 28, I think I might have got it! Because I was so rapt with the wonder of it.

#### **CHAPTER 28: WHERE DOES IT BELONG?**

This chapter is quite distinct. It does not relate directly to what comes immediately before it, or after it, in the Book of Job; though it has everything to do with the whole theme of this book about Job, especially to do with Job's faith that we have been thinking about.

The scholars always like everything to fit into their tidy patterns—don't we all? So they come to chapter 28 and they scratch their heads and they say: 'Well, maybe it has been put in later, or maybe it should be somewhere else', or 'Who spoke it: was it Job or someone else (Zophar, even, to square things up?)', or 'Has it been imported from a completely different work?' These things occupy their minds, and

parts of their commentaries. But human beings do not fit into tidy little patterns, and nor does life. Especially with those who are born of the Spirit: Jesus said, 'The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit' (John 3:8). You cannot expect to predict where they are coming from, or where they are going to, because they are flowing with God, and God cannot be contained in neat and tidy patterns. Neither can human beings, or human life. So I am glad that chapter 28 is plonked here in the middle of the Book of Job, and that the scholars cannot quite make head or tail of how it came to be there, or what it is doing there. There are questions like: 'Who is speaking in this chapter?' It is just after chapter 27, where Job has been speaking, and there is nothing to say that someone else picks up speaking at this point, so just reading it naturally, you would think that this is something that Job is saying. It is, however, in some contrast with the agitation of Job and the friends, and the tension that is there. This chapter is quite free from any tension or agitation: it is serene, it is tranquil. This is not to say that it was not Job who said it, for it was certainly something that Job knew. Sometimes people say: 'Maybe it is the storyteller coming in, and in the middle of this just putting in this beautiful poem on wisdom, to say something about where none of them have got to so far, but where we are heading in the end'—that may be it: an interlude.

### **HUMAN INGENUITY AND DETERMINATION**

Leaving those questions aside, let us see what it actually says first of all, and then see how it relates to the rest of the Book of Job.

- 28:1 Surely there is a mine for silver,  
and a place for gold to be refined.  
2 Iron is taken out of the earth,  
and copper is smelted from ore.  
3 Miners put an end to darkness,  
and search out to the farthest bound  
the ore in gloom and deep darkness.  
4 They open shafts in a valley away from human habitation;  
they are forgotten by travelers,  
they sway suspended, remote from people.  
5 As for the earth, out of it comes bread;  
but underneath it is turned up as by fire.  
6 Its stones are the place of sapphires,  
and its dust contains gold.  
7 That path no bird of prey knows,  
and the falcon's eye has not seen it.  
8 The proud wild animals have not trodden it;  
the lion has not passed over it.  
9 They put their hand to the flinty rock,  
and overturn mountains by the roots.  
10 They cut out channels in the rocks,  
and their eyes see every precious thing.  
11 The sources of the rivers they probe;  
hidden things they bring to light.

Verses 1–11 are about mining, and wisdom is not mentioned until verse 12. The passage intrigues us, and makes us wonder what this is all about. It is a wonderful poem about the ends to which human beings are capable of going to get precious things. This really came alive to me when I was living at Coober Pedy, an opal mining town in the dry far north of South Australia. ‘Miners put an end to darkness, and search out to the farthest bound the ore in gloom and deep darkness. They open shafts in a valley away from human habitation’: Coober Pedy is miles from anywhere, and no human being would choose to inhabit that place. Even the Aboriginal people, when they were walking through there, never stopped at where Coober Pedy is now—they just passed through. No one would want to stop there, especially in the middle of summer. But underneath all of that God put opal—I think because He had told the human beings to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’ (Genesis 1:28), and even though there were some places people would not choose to go naturally, He made it so they would go there anyway! The miners dig deep shafts: they started digging them by hand, with pick and shovel; now they dig them with machines, and drill right down into the rock. Light comes where it has never come before, and the opal comes out into the light. When it is locked into the rock, it is black—it has never seen the light. When it comes out, all the ‘lights’ in the stone shine in the sunlight. Even before that, when they have their underground lights shining on the wall, trying to spot the opal. One of my mining friends, when he found some ‘colour’, would switch his machine off, shine his lights on it, and just marvel, before he chipped it out. He was looking at something that no one had ever seen before. I have been down there in those shafts.

The Stuart Highway is now bitumenised, and the cars and the busses go shooting over the top: tourists can go straight past and not know what is down there. They can see the tops of the shafts, and the mounds of dirt, but underneath, ‘forgotten by travellers’, the miners are at work. Also I have been on the winch that lowers you down the sixty-foot shaft: it is a narrow piece of board that you sit on, suspended in the darkness, as you go down: ‘they sway suspended, remote from people’! Further up the track, at Mintabie, they do not dig shafts there so much: they have open-cut mining. They get huge D9 Caterpillar bulldozers, and they shift mountains of hard rock: ‘They put their hand to the flinty rock, and overturn mountains by the roots.’ The whole of the country around Mintabie is devastated by enormous deep cuts and gougers from the bulldozers and the big scrapers. They scoop along the bottom of the cut, and people follow behind and watch for the opal: ‘They cut out channels in the rocks, and their eyes see every precious thing.’

So this is a hymn to the ingenuity and glory of human beings. It chooses mining, which was the most advanced form of technology, or where humans had to be so much more inventive than any other area in ancient days. That can still be the case: we are very aware of the power and determination of the mining industry, and the huge spending that people are prepared to risk on it. We let nothing escape us when we are after those treasures that are locked in the earth. We do ‘overturn mountains’. Once we have got it out, ‘Iron is taken out of the earth, and copper is smelted from ore.’ The smelting processes in the ancient world were quite ingenious: think of the great bronze objects that were made for the temple in Jerusalem in Solomon’s time, and the advanced technology that was involved in that. We have gone far beyond that now in our own day with how we process metals. It is a vast industry. Humans go far beyond the birds and animals: the falcon can see much further than we can, and its eyes are much sharper than ours, but it does not get under the earth where those



do, but that will not get you wisdom.’ ‘Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?”’ But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.’ What is that word? It is the word of God, the word of His commandment—the word of His relating to us, and us to Him.

### **CHRIST OUR WISDOM**

That is picked up in the New Testament, when we see that Christ has come from the heights and gone to the depths and returned to the heights again, and fills all things. If you really want to know what wisdom is all about, you will need to know him. Ephesians 4:7–10: ‘But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, “When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.” (When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)’ It then goes on to say about the gifts he has given to us in the church. In another place it is said of Jesus, ‘in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Colossians 2:3). He is the one who has gone higher than the heights and lower than the depths, and he fills all things, So if you want to know the sum of all things, and all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, it is Christ you need to go to, and it is Christ you need to relate to: the one who has come from God, and who has done most fully all the will of God, in grace and truth. Paul in Romans 10:6–9, when he is quoting Deuteronomy 30: ‘the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (that is, to bring Christ down) “or “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.’ The word of Christ—of relating to him—that comes to us in the gospel of grace: this is true wisdom So ‘Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified’ (1 Corinthians 1:22–23), ‘in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’.

That is going beyond what Job 28 strictly says, but it is good to relate this to the whole of the Scriptures, and see how it coheres together.

### **WISDOM, MONEY, AND DEATH**

What price wisdom?

- 28:15 It cannot be gotten for gold,  
and silver cannot be weighed out as its price.  
16 It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir,  
in precious onyx or sapphire.  
17 Gold and glass cannot equal it,  
nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold.  
18 No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal;  
the price of wisdom is above pearls.  
19 The chrysolite of Ethiopia cannot compare with it,  
nor can it be valued in pure gold.

Wisdom is not something that can be bought and sold, or bartered for, no matter what price is offered. The whole knowing and exercise of wisdom is of a different order from that. So where is it to be found?

28:20 Where then does wisdom come from?  
And where is the place of understanding?  
21 It is hidden from the eyes of all living,  
and concealed from the birds of the air.

Sometimes people look to nature: perhaps the birds know what it is all about, for they seem very free and happy. But they are simply being birds!

28:22 Abaddon and Death say,  
'We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.'

That is interesting: that death may help to bring wisdom near. But it will not be wisdom itself. When we begin to sense the limitations that death places on our lives, that leads us to look beyond those limitations, beyond everything that is just 'under the sun'. We certainly found that Job, who expected death to be very close to him, and who even desired it at times, with the wisdom that he had, and the freedom and the lack of the need to 'pussyfoot around' that this gave him, meant that his wisdom was certainly above that of the comforters, who were still trying to sort it all out this side of death. Ecclesiastes 7:4 says on that score: 'The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.' If we are going to be wise, we need to take death into account, and give some thought and consideration to it, and not just ignore it. You will not be wise if you seek to ignore the reality of death. But even though death may help us to be wise, if death itself were true wisdom, that would be a very nihilistic and depressing outcome.

### **GOD'S WISDOM AT WORK IN CREATION**

The answer finally comes in verse 23; but not in a light or facile way:

28:23 God understands the way to it,  
and he knows its place.  
24 For he looks to the ends of the earth,  
and sees everything under the heavens.  
25 When he gave to the wind its weight,  
and apportioned out the waters by measure;  
26 when he made a decree for the rain,  
and a way for the thunderbolt;  
27 then he saw it and declared it;  
he established it, and searched it out.

God knows wisdom, and He knows it by virtue of the way He has made everything and sees everything. All wisdom is with Him, especially with regard to creation: what He has made, and His act of making and sustaining and ordering it. Proverbs 8:22–31, another lovely wisdom poem, is worth comparing with this, where wisdom itself is speaking, while God is creating the earth:

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,  
the first of his acts of long ago.  
Ages ago I was set up,

at the first, before the beginning of the earth.  
When there were no depths I was brought forth,  
when there were no springs abounding with water.  
Before the mountains had been shaped,  
before the hills, I was brought forth—  
when he had not yet made earth and fields,  
or the world's first bits of soil.  
When he established the heavens, I was there,  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,  
when he made firm the skies above,  
when he established the fountains of the deep,  
when he assigned to the sea its limit,  
so that the waters might not transgress his command,  
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,  
then I was beside him, like a master worker;  
and I was daily his delight,  
rejoicing before him always,  
rejoicing in his inhabited world  
and delighting in the human race.

Wisdom was there from the beginning, before anything was made, and as things were being made, so everything that is made by God is structured and measured according to wisdom. Wisdom delights in all that has been made, and especially in the human beings: for they, above all have been structured according to wisdom, in the image of God.

We get a similar taste of that in these verses from Job 28. It is talking about things like the vast heavens, and the wind with its mighty force, and the waters of the oceans around the earth with their surgings, and the rain with its beating, and the lightning with its fearsome thunder, and it says God is making all these things. When we are in the middle of these things, they are frightening. All the elements of the storm are there—the tempest, over which we have no control—for us, it is like chaos breaking loose, when we are in the middle of, say, a fierce storm at sea. But look at the words that are used in regard to that. ‘When he gave to the wind its *weight*’: I’ll measure this out for you, wind—that is how heavy you will be. ‘When he . . . apportioned out the waters by *measure*’: Oceans, you will be so big, but no bigger; you will come so far up the land but no further; you are very big, but you will only be able to go so high when the waves come. ‘He made a *decree* for the rain’: so He tells the rain when to rain and when not to rain—the Bible is full of instances of that. ‘He made . . . a *way* for the thunderbolt’: lightning seems quite erratic, this is saying that there is a way channelled out for it, and then it follows that way—that is the way ordained for it by the wisdom of God. We are talking about the elemental forces here, but they are all governed by the wisdom of God. That is a wonderful thing to know, when you are in the middle of a storm—whether a literal storm or a metaphorical storm. That is wisdom.

When Jesus came up against rejection and failure in his ministry in the towns around Bethsaida and Capernaum, his own home base—they ended up totally rejecting his ministry, except for the few that he called out from there, like Peter and James and John, Andrew and Matthew—he prayed: ‘Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will”’ (Luke 10:21)—that was Your wisdom.

When we come up against that kind of failure, that kind of tempest and disruption, we can know, as he did, that this is structured and ordered according to the wisdom of God. It is following those channels that He has carved, and it is all according to His measuring out. These are great measures, but governed by God. When we know that, we are starting to know wisdom. We are beginning to fear the Lord.

### **FEAR GOD**

Ecclesiastes comes to the conclusion, right at the end:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone [*literally* the whole of being human]. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:13–14).

We try to explain that term ‘the fear of the Lord’ in many ways. We say it is an awe of God’s awesomeness, or it is a healthy respect for God, or it is reverence. But I do not think we can ever really get away from that word ‘fear’. Fear the Lord—fear His judgments. That is what Ecclesiastes is saying here. God knows everything, from before the beginning to after the end, and Christ has plumbed all of those heights and depths, so all wisdom is with God: fear God. There is nothing you will ever hide from Him: fear His judgments. Have a good, strong love and fear of God, and you will begin to be wise.

Job 28 concludes:

28:28 And he said to humankind,  
‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;  
and to depart from evil is understanding.’”

To hear God’s commandments, and live by them in direct relationship with God: that is wisdom, and understanding.

Note that God does not just say, ‘Ha! You will never find it out’. If this last verse were not there, and we were left simply with the raging elements and God’s governance of them, it might be saying that, and we might think all of that is all too much for us and we will never understand it. No: God actually communicates it to us. After He has done all of this—after He has made all of creation and structured and ordered it according to wisdom, measured and right in all its dynamic movements and forces—He then speaks to us, to humankind, and He says: ‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom’. That word ‘Truly’ is literally ‘Behold!’—look, and see! God hides nothing from us. ‘And to depart from evil is understanding’: I will make clear to you all my commandments, so you can know the way life is really structured, and how you can live and love wisely. God does not leave us wondering—He actually communicates this to us.

### **A CLEAR GLIMPSE**

Now we have read this wonderful chapter 28, we can return to the question, What is its place in the book? Francis Andersen has this to say (p. 224):

The tranquillity and detachment of this poem, its almost scientific objectivity, matches the suspense in which the reader’s thought is held at this point. The debate is done. Nothing is settled. The wit of men is exhausted, and God is still silent. The question does not have to be stated to enter our minds: ‘Where can we find wisdom?’



‘Its almost scientific objectivity’: as when it is talking about creation, and the lengths to which humans will go in their enterprises. ‘The debate is done. Nothing is settled. The wit of men is exhausted’. Mortals do not know the way to wisdom: the counsellors have been arguing, Job has been arguing. Job has been getting caught up into it emotionally, and so have they, but they have not reached any conclusion—we do not know the way to it. ‘God is still silent.’ We know that God is going to speak before the end of the book, but at this point He has not spoken yet.

So this chapter shows us the impasse that has been reached, where these great men—remember that Job’s counsellors were great men and great theologians too—had come to these tremendous issues of life, and had reached no conclusion as yet that they could agree on. This poem is placed at this point to highlight that. However great we are—however strong our intellect and mighty our enterprises as a human race—we will not come to the answer of these great issues of life.

Chapter 28 also takes us to where we are going. The very things that it says here—‘God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth, and sees everything under the heavens’, and how God created and governs the elements by wisdom—all of this is what God is going to show Job before the end of the book. In the wonders of creation, and His measured control of all its mighty forces, God will show to Job and the counsellors His true wisdom. The end of this poem is an indication of where we are going to come to by the end of the book. But we are not there yet. This is part of the skill of this writing, and why it is so true to life, that it does not swing in the answers in a pious or easy way. We could say, Oh yes, we know the answer to that: ‘God knows the way to it! Fear the Lord—that is wisdom! To depart from evil is understanding!’ We could say that in a very light way, as clichés. Is not that what the counsellors were doing? ‘You’ve got to fear the Lord, and you’ve got to depart from evil, you wicked man!’ They were telling him that, but they themselves still had not got to the bottom of it. We could do the same.

Here in chapter 28 we have a small vignette or overview of the whole book, showing where it has come from, where it has got to, and where it is going. But this is not the final word. It is inserted rather like some of the visions in the Book of Revelation. There are great turmoils and tribulations throughout that book, in the cut and thrust of human life, and in the middle of it the martyrs are crying out to God as to why they are there, and why they have been killed, and how much longer this suffering is going to be continued, and where is the kingdom of God in all this (see Revelation 6:9–11)? Every now and then in the book of Revelation are put in visions of where we are heading to, and what it is all about. Chapters 4 and 5: ‘I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open!’—which gave admission to the worship in heaven. Chapter 7: ‘I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands . . . They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’ Chapter 14: ‘I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound

of harpists playing on their harps, and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders.’ Then, after each of these, it goes back to the unfolding of all the judgments on the earth. Right at the end of the book is the wonderful vision of the heavenly city, that these earlier visions have been preparing us for, to show us what has really been going on all the time.

Similarly, chapter 28 of the book of Job, in the middle of this cut and thrust and turbulence, tells us not just where we are going, but what the whole thing is all about. The visions in the Book of Revelation do not tell us the way it is going to end up in the sense that, ‘Well, you are going to have to put up with this now, but it will turn out all right in the end! They are not saying, ‘Hold the fort, for I am coming!’—hang in there as long as you can! Those visions in the Book of Revelation tell us what is really happening all along. The same can be said of chapter 28 of the book of Job. It shows us where wisdom is really to be found, and what is going on all the time, from the beginning of creation right to the end, and so gives the context for understanding what has been happening to Job and his friends, as far as God is concerned. That is why it is such a wonderful piece.

It is not a pious answer. That is what the counsellors were trying to give. Their piety was shattered against the reality of Job’s suffering, and the reality of God. This is not a pious interjection, closing off the argument. It is a vignette, or overview, of the whole scene, and its outcome.

We go on from there, because Job still has his final words to say. Then we come to a very interesting character called Elihu, whom we shall meet in the next section. We are back, then, in the cut and thrust and the murky confusion of it all, before God finally speaks. Here, for one clear and breath-taking moment, we have been given to see beyond all that, at the whole of the landscape that we are traversing.

*Father, we thank You that You hold back from us nothing that is necessary to accomplish all the purposes of your kingdom of love and of grace, and that You sustain us in that by your word. We thank You that, in the times we cannot see our way clear, and when we are in confusion and puzzlement, the wisdom of your word comes to us, setting out the way things are, even though we may not be able to see them as such at the time. We thank You for this chapter of the book of Job, for all that it speaks to us of the wonderful way in which You have made humanity, and of the even more wonderful way You have brought us to Your wisdom, and brought Yourself to us, in Christ our Lord. Amen.*