

Wisdom Gained

God's wisdom is found in fearing and obeying Him.

Three high school friends sat together at their class reunion. They swapped stories about their lives after graduation. Carl had joined the army and served four deployments overseas in combat zones. He regaled his buddies with harrowing war stories, and they, in turn, thanked Carl for his military service.

Robert went to college after high school, graduated with honors, and soon became a successful businessman. He told his friends about his many travel adventures, both domestic and international. It seemed to them as though Robert had visited every major attraction in the world. They were envious but nevertheless thrilled that their high school friend was so successful.

The third friend, Ronald, had listened intently to Carl's and Robert's stories. Other than a few casual comments, however, he said very little about himself. Ronald's reticence to talk about his experiences was surprising to his companions, since he had been so popular and outgoing in high school. After some lighthearted teasing and earnest quizzing, Ronald began to tell his surprising story. He too had gone to college after high school, completed graduate school, and signed on with a prestigious international corporation. People praised him for the wisdom of his choices in pursuing a stellar career.

Ronald's expression became more serious as he told his friends about the years of challenge he had faced. His experience at the university had included a serious questioning and then abandonment of his admittedly superficial religious beliefs. When a national crisis evoked a sense of patriotic fervor, Ronald resigned his job and joined the army. He gained a real sense of purpose for a time, but in the end the brutality of combat added to his confused and empty outlook on life. When his term of enlistment ended, he returned to civilian life and rekindled a relationship with his college sweetheart.

The woman was a committed Christian, however, and Ronald soon upended their relationship by ridiculing her belief in Christ. One day as he sat alone and despondent in his apartment, Ronald saw a Bible on a lamp table. He picked it up, opened it to a random passage, and began to read. As he read the Scriptures, the Lord began to convict him of his sins, and Ronald began to weep. He prayed and asked God for forgiveness and for a reason to live.

At this point, Ronald looked at his two high-school friends and said, “Guys, receiving forgiveness and believing in Jesus Christ that day was absolutely the wisest decision I have ever made in my life. God changed everything for me, and my life has never been the same!”

In this session, we will examine a passage in Job that talks about where to find true wisdom. People search for wisdom in many places, but Scripture teaches us that God’s wisdom is found in fearing and obeying Him.

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

JOB 22:1–31:40

The theme of the third round of friends’ speeches (Job 22:1–31:40) can be summed up as the blatant but unfounded accusation that Job was a heinous sinner. The round of speeches proceeded in the same pattern established in the first two rounds: Eliphaz spoke first by launching into an unsubstantiated tirade against Job. He blatantly accused Job of abusing helpless people such as widows and orphans (22:1–30)! Job’s response to Eliphaz ignored the friend’s wild charges and instead expressed frustration with God’s apparent apathy about the injustice of Job’s plight (23:1–24:25). Nevertheless, Job was convinced of God’s absolute righteousness and was equally confident in his own innocence of any egregious sins. He displayed a courageous honesty in his search for vindication before God.

Bildad spoke next and delivered a brief yet boiling-hot accusation (25:1–6). He contended that Job was totally depraved, calling him vile names such as “maggot” and “worm” (25:6). Job responded sarcastically to Bildad that the friend’s counsel was so brilliant that it could enlighten the unwise (26:1–4). Then in 26:5–14, Job presented a magnificent recital of God’s splendor that is excelled in the Book of Job only when God speaks in chapters 38–41. Finally, using a powerful oath, Job submitted his case to God for God’s resolution (27:1–6). Thereafter, Job described the fate of the wicked (27:7–23). The brevity of Bildad’s speech plus the absence of a speech by Zophar in this third cycle suggests that the three friends had exhausted their arguments.

Job 28:1–28 is a poem (or hymn) about wisdom. Bible scholars differ on whether this chapter is a continuation of Job’s speech or a stand-alone commentary on the nature of true wisdom. In either case, we can be confident that this chapter and likewise all of the other chapters are ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit. The poem functions as an interlude between Job’s debate with his three friends and the conclusive episodes in the narrative.

From the perspective of these four characters, the book seems to have reached a stalemate. However, the reader has information not available to Job and his friends. So the poem provides the reader an opportunity to contemplate the source and value of true wisdom. It lays the foundation for God to speak by showing that the human mind can only find true wisdom when God reveals it.

After Zophar's failure to speak, Job then delivered a second speech in the cycle (29:1–31:40). He reflected upon memories of his past blessings by God and his present suffering. He once more asserted his innocence. After this lengthy speech, however, Job would not speak again except in two brief, humble responses to God's speeches (40:3-5; 42:1-6).

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

VALUED (Job 28:12-19)

After expounding on the ways treasure hunters pursue valuable metals below the ground, Job posed a question about where wisdom could be found. He concluded that wisdom must be sought beyond worldly sources and thus was of much greater value than precious metals.

VERSE 12

But where can wisdom be found, and where is understanding located?

Wisdom may be defined as the appropriate application of knowledge. Thus, the Hebrew term denoted everything from the skill of a shipbuilder in crafting a sailing vessel to the musings of a philosopher on the true meaning of life. Here in Job 28:12, however, wisdom refers to living in a manner that pleases God. It is synonymous with **understanding**, the proper result of acquiring knowledge. The two words thus carry the sense of applying God's Word to daily life. Although Job probably lived before the Old Testament Scriptures were written down, he clearly recognized that human beings could know God, could understand His ways and expectations, and therefore could apply such knowledge to their daily decisions and activities.

Job's poem about wisdom opens with a catalog of some technological achievements from Job's historical era (28:1-11). These industrial triumphs focused on the mining and refinement of valuable metals and precious gemstones. People could discover these treasures even though they were

hidden deep within the earth. People could then extract the valuables from their secret hiding places, cutting tunnels through solid rock, illuminating the darkness in the mines, and transporting food to the workers.

Verse 12 contains the first direct mention of *wisdom* in the chapter. People can unearth valuable metals and minerals hidden beneath the planet's surface. They can change the landscape and overcome obstacles no other creature can overcome. But human beings still cannot find wisdom using their best ingenuity and most amazing technology.

VERSE 13

No one can know its value, since it cannot be found in the land of the living.

The phrase **land of the living** is a designation for land masses on the earth. The existence of human beings was confined to this realm. The technology of Job's era did not yet permit human beings to fly or travel underwater for extended periods. While modern humans have now mastered both technologies, we have not discovered a geographic location where people might acquire wisdom in the same way they find gold or diamonds. Nor can wisdom be bought since no material wealth could equal its **value**. The equivalent commodity of wisdom simply did not exist on earth. Therefore, no monetary value could even be placed on it.

VERSE 14

The ocean depths say, "It's not in me," while the sea declares, "I don't have it."

Less than a third of the earth's surface is land. The rest is water. Ships traversed **the sea** in Job's time as they do today. Nonetheless, the sea remained an endless and mysterious setting. Standing on its beaches, people noticed that the sea appeared to vanish over the horizon. From the deck of a ship, the **ocean depths** appeared to be bottomless. So Job pondered if wisdom could be found there. The *sea* declared in a personified voice, "**I don't have it.**"

VERSE 15

Gold cannot be exchanged for it, and silver cannot be weighed out for its price.

In Job's time, most trade was conducted using the barter system. Job 28:15-19 lists a catalog of earthly treasures that people in every generation have deemed to have great value. They were all used in lieu of currency. **Gold** and **silver** long have been a primary medium of exchange. The weight of the

metal rather than monetary denomination governed buying power. In the patriarchal world in which Job lived, *silver* was sometimes considered to be more valuable than gold. Later, coins were made from both metals. But the coins still could not be used to purchase wisdom. No quantity of gold and silver ever could match the true value of wisdom.

VERSE 16

Wisdom cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, in precious onyx or lapis lazuli.

Gold was and is cherished for its rarity, splendor, and workability. Melting does not damage gold, and it is exceptionally malleable in its solid state. It occurs within nature in a solid state and the only metallurgical process needed before use is refining. The **gold of Ophir** was deemed highly valuable as some of the finest gold available. In fact, this gold became the quality standard for purity in the commercial language of the ancient Near East. Ironically, the location of ancient Ophir is uncertain. India, Arabia, South Africa, and East Africa have all been suggested as possible sites. Whatever the locality, the place was noted for its trade, especially in gold.

Onyx and **lapis lazuli** (“sapphire,” KJV; ESV) are precious stones. *Onyx* is a flat, banded, translucent form of quartz. *Lapis lazuli* is a blue variety of corundum. Corundum is a hard mineral that crystallizes into a range of exquisite colors.

VERSE 17

Gold and glass do not compare with it, and articles of fine gold cannot be exchanged for it.

Glass (“crystal,” KJV; NIV) was introduced early in the history of Egypt. It reached its zenith there during the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties. Thus, the apex of Egyptian glass making coincided with the Israelites’ miraculous deliverance out of Egypt under Moses. Whereas some glass vessels from Egypt have survived, glass seems to have been more common in jewelry as either beads or inlay.

In Job’s time, glass was probably opaque. It was used chiefly in making ornamental objects such as jewelry or small bottles. Its value was relative to gold according to Job 28:17. **Fine gold** was fabricated into a variety of products, from jewelry to dining utensils, from decorative inlays to idols. However, neither glass nor gold objects could be **exchanged** for wisdom. The Hebrew verb rendered *exchanged* suggests that such items that are exchanged in the barter system must have equal value.

VERSE 18

Coral and quartz are not worth mentioning. The price of wisdom is beyond pearls.

In biblical times, **coral** was harvested primarily from the Mediterranean, Red, and Adriatic Seas. Although *coral* is technically formed as calcium deposits of certain marine animals and not a precious stone, the red coral harvested from the aforementioned seas was among the items traded in the worldwide marketplaces. It was used in jewelry and ornamentation and was especially prized in markets that did not have direct access to the sea.

The precise identifications of the other two precious stones mentioned in this verse are uncertain. The Hebrew word rendered **quartz** (“pearls,” KJV; “crystal,” ESV; “jasper,” NIV) occurs only here in the entire Old Testament. Similarly, the word rendered **pearls** (“rubies,” KJV; NIV) appears only in a half-dozen places. Nevertheless, modern uncertainty about the exact meaning of these Hebrew terms does not diminish the point being made in the verse. Precious gems of all types might have great value in terms of bartering and trading, but they were **not worth mentioning** in terms of their relative value against **the price of wisdom**. To paraphrase a modern proverbial saying about happiness, Job was declaring, “You can’t buy wisdom!”

VERSE 19

Topaz from Cush cannot compare with it, and it cannot be valued in pure gold.

Job continued his emphasis on wisdom’s incomparable value. **Topaz** was one of the stones later attached to the Israelite high priest’s breastplate (see Ex. 28:17). In the New Testament, the apostle John saw in his end-times vision that *topaz* will appear on the foundation of the wall in New Jerusalem (see Rev. 21:20). The region of **Cush** was located to the south of Egypt. The border between these two kingdoms fluctuated, and on occasion Cushite kings ruled Egypt. Job noted that the region was a rich source of *topaz*. Indeed, Job declared that Cush’s *topaz* could not **be valued in pure gold**.

Job’s contention throughout all of these comparisons was not that it was impossible for human beings to obtain true wisdom. Rather, he argued that true wisdom cannot be obtained by the same means as obtaining valuable gems and metals—that is, by human technological efforts.

The human value system often pursues the wrong goals for life. The wisdom that comes from God is more valuable than all earthly treasures. It is not a commodity in the marketplace. It cannot be purchased at any price. The wise person values and treasures godly wisdom. Seeking God’s wisdom through a growing relationship with Him deserves priority in our daily lives.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Minerals and Metals” on pages 1104–1107 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Why do you think the biblical writer compared godly wisdom to various precious metals? To what precious metal would you compare your faith in Jesus? Explain.

HIDDEN (Job 28:20-22)

Job explained that wisdom is hidden from the living and the dead. Neither is able to fully grasp true wisdom. Thus, neither can be the source of wisdom.

VERSE 20

Where then does wisdom come from, and where is understanding located?

As was stated previously, Job 28 is written in a poetic form called parallelism. Consequently, in verse 20 the terms **wisdom** and **understanding** have a parallel meaning and purpose. The second half of the verse essentially is a restatement of the first half. Together the two halves of the verse put emphasis on a lingering question. If true wisdom cannot be mined from the earth like gold and silver and it cannot be bought in the marketplace for any price, **where then does wisdom come from?**

In the context of the narrative in the Book of Job, three experienced human counselors (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) had already demonstrated the total inadequacy of human insight to provide true wisdom. Thus, for readers of the Book of Job, the question concerning wisdom’s location is rhetorical. It prompts the reader to acknowledge human inadequacy and to anticipate God’s speech yet to come.

VERSE 21

It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing and concealed from the birds of the sky.

The source of true wisdom is not perceived with physical sight. **It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing.** Even the potential sight advantage of **the birds of the sky** cannot see the source of true wisdom. Birds, of course, have the ability in flight to survey a much larger portion of the surrounding landscape. Moreover, many birds possess vastly superior eyesight to that of human beings. Yet, true wisdom is **concealed** from even the sharpest eyesight.

VERSE 22

Abaddon and Death say, “We have heard news of it with our ears.”

The term **Abaddon** is the transliteration (substituting English letters for Hebrew letters) of a Hebrew term of uncertain meaning. Some English Bible translations offer the meaning “destruction” (see KJV; NIV) because of its common association with **Death**. In Job 26:6, the term *Abaddon* is paired with the related term “Sheol.”

The fuller New Testament understanding of the afterlife obviously did not exist in Job’s time. God’s people in the Old Testament era believed in some form of life after death, but they had not been given the Spirit-revealed awareness of heaven and hell. What they did know was that people who died returned to the dust of the earth—whether buried or not—as their lifeless physical bodies decayed. With the phrase *Abaddon and Death*, therefore, Job was referring to the realm of the dead. He personified the terms so that he could emphasize the source of true wisdom was located in neither human life nor death.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Wisdom and Wise Men” on pages 1657–1658 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What is the place of wisdom in the New Testament believer’s life? What is the relationship between wisdom and faith?

FOUND (Job 28:23-27)

Job declared that only God is the source of true wisdom. God’s wisdom is seen in His creative work.

VERSE 23

But God understands the way to wisdom, and he knows its location.

God alone has wisdom, and humanity can possess it only by the revelation of God. In this verse, **wisdom** is described as a traveler’s destination. The word **way** translates the Hebrew term for a road or path. This noun is derived from a verb that means “to tread or trample.” It graphically depicts a well-worn path formed by the constant trampling of feet. Hence, the word was used not only for walking paths through fields but also for major caravan routes such

as the “road to the land of the Philistines” (Ex. 13:17) and the “way of the sea” (Isa. 9:1). Related to this meaning was its usage to describe a journey along such a path, especially a journey of several days’ duration. In Job 28:23 the word has a figurative sense. It denotes the journey of life.

In the subsequent verses, readers will discover that God’s understanding and knowledge of the road to wisdom was complete because He created the road. In light of the New Testament, we know that God indeed has traveled this journey in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, people are exhorted to act and behave in a manner that pleases God.

VERSE 24

For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens.

This verse introduces the rationale for saying God is the only source of true wisdom. The statement **he looks to the ends of the earth** emphasizes that God can see the end from the beginning, and vice versa. No places, persons, and events **under the heavens** are beyond His understanding or control.

VERSES 25-27

When God fixed the weight of the wind and distributed the water by measure, when he established a limit for the rain and a path for the lightning, he considered wisdom and evaluated it; he established it and examined it.

The phrase **the weight of the wind** (“the force of the wind,” NIV) likely refers to the wind’s velocity or movement. The wind can be felt and heard but not seen except in the effect it has on visible objects (see John 3:8). God created the wind to be this way, just as He **distributed the water by measure** and **established a limit for the rain and a path for the lightning**. Such natural phenomena are often associated in the Old Testament with theophanies (see Ex. 19:18; Judg. 5:4; Ps. 18:6-15). A theophany is a visible manifestation of God in some form to an individual or a group of people.

As the source of the most mysterious and powerful natural forces, God also is the singular source of **wisdom**. Job used four verbs—two parallel pairs—to emphasize the Lord alone as the source of wisdom. God **considered ... and evaluated it** (“saw it and declared it,” ESV) and He **established it and examined it** (“prepared it ... searched it out,” KJV; “confirmed it and tested it,” NIV). These verses emphasize the idea of careful research and testing as an image of the supremacy of God’s design in including wisdom as a key component in creation. Thus, true wisdom comes from God alone.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Creation” on pages 361–362 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does the created order reveal God’s wisdom? How do Paul’s words in Romans 1:18-23 add to your appreciation and understanding of Job 28?

OFFERED (Job 28:28)

Job announced that wisdom is found in fearing God and turning to Him in repentance.

VERSE 28

He said to mankind, “The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom. And to turn from evil is understanding.”

The words **He said to mankind** indicate the message that follows is universally applicable to humanity in all generations. The way to true wisdom for human beings is through a right relationship with God—described in this verse as **the fear of the Lord**. The *fear of the Lord* is an expression of faith. It is the beginning of both knowledge and wisdom (see Prov. 1:7; 9:10). *Fear* is a deep response of awe, or reverence, to the revelation of God’s presence and power (see Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 1:28; Rev. 1:17). Such a reverence (when sincere) leads to a transformed life. Thus, Job added that **to turn from evil is understanding**.

The awesome realization that God is holy and humanity is sinful dominates this awareness. Hence the terminology is one of submission to the Lord both in attitude and behavior. The fear of God denotes reverence that leads to repentance. Repentance begins with surrender to God. True wisdom consists of fearing God; it should lead to a Christlike lifestyle.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Memorize Job 28:28. How would you define the fear of the Lord? What is a recent experience in which you found the fear of the Lord to be a wise guide for decision making or responding to a difficult situation?