Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job
"Making Sense of Life"
by Arden C. Autry

Lesson 1: Introduction

One of our goals in the Adult Curriculum of First United Methodist Church is to study something in each major section of the Old Testament once every five years. This year we are studying something from the poetic material of the OT. When we think of poetry in the Old Testament, we naturally think of the Psalms, but Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (in large part, at least), and the Song of Solomon are also included in this category. (Large segments of the Prophets are written in poetry, but we treat the Major and Minor Prophets in other years.) From the books usually referred to generally as the poetic material, this year we study Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. These particular books are also commonly referred to as "Wisdom Literature."

Each of these wisdom books is important on its own, but there are certain helpful perspectives which can best be seen by studying them together. Knowing the main lessons of Ecclesiastes can help us read Job, and Job can help us understand how to profit from our reading of Proverbs. For our purposes in this course, we will naturally have to get only an overview of each book and not a detailed knowledge. The hope is that the overview of each (and the perspective provided by viewing each in relation to the other two) will enrich our individual reading and study of these books on our own.

Wisdom in the Old Testament

"Wisdom" in the OT has primarily to do with practical application in life rather than the more speculative, intellectual understanding of wisdom in Greek thought (which provides the basis for how "wisdom" is understood in Western civilization). Nevertheless, the OT wisdom books raise the most profound questions concerning the nature and meaning of human existence, the problem of pain and suffering, etc. For this introductory lesson, the following paragraphs are intended to characterize the kind of wisdom contained in each of the three books we are studying. Each book has its own perspective and primary contribution to make. When the three books are placed side by side for comparison, our understanding of each is enhanced and its particular wisdom made more accessible to us.

The Book of Proverbs: Wisdom Through Observation

A simple way to describe the wisdom found in Proverbs is to say that God gives us instructions through the wise observations of others. Proverbs is the "voice of experience" with the added dimension of divine inspiration.

This book contains some sections of continuous teaching (the famous part on the "virtuous woman" in ch. 31, for example), but a great deal of the book is given over to individual wise sayings or teachings. In much of the book, therefore, one verse may not have a direct relationship to the preceding verse or to the following verse. This makes context a different kind of concern in Proverbs than in most of the Bible, since the verse by itself is often its complete context (except for its context in life, which is the really necessary context for

appreciating the proverbs). Note also that much of Proverbs is expressed in poetic parallelism (as discussed below). Also, figurative language (not meant to be taken literally) is abundant, as is often the case in poetry.

Of great importance in reading and using the book of Proverbs correctly is the proper understanding of the nature of its teachings. Many times people read and quote the book as though it is a book of promises. This can cause great and unnecessary difficulty. The proverbs are really more in the nature of *instruction* than *promises*. They are not meant to be guarantees of success, but are rather intended to show us the way we should live. Put another way, this is not "recipe" knowledge, which will always assure us of the desired result if put into practice. But it is the wisdom we should heed if we desire our lives to be fruitful and pleasing to God. This aspect of the Book of Proverbs will be discussed more fully in Lessons 2 and 3.

The Book of Ecclesiastes: Wisdom Through Questioning

One way to summarize the concluding point of this book is to say that even the man who "had all the answers" knew he would have to give an answer to God for his life (12:13-14). The profundity of Ecclesiastes, however, is found in how the author finally came to that conclusion through reflection on the frustrations and limitations encountered in life, even when that life is relatively full by human standards.

This is not an easy book, but its main point is clear enough: life is futile unless lived for God. It should probably be thought of more as a book of questions than as a book of answers. The kind of wisdom found here is what some have called "cynical wisdom" (Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Zondervan, 1993, p. 212). "Cynical" may be a surprising word to hear in connection with material in the Bible, but it is a very apt description of the perspective of most of Ecclesiastes.

Cynical wisdom is the kind of wisdom gained by bitter experience, disappointment, by being disillusioned and seeing the "vanity" of false hopes, delights, and superficial values. Most of the book is unrelentingly cynical until you come to the very end. You need to know how the book concludes in order to grasp the overall message and in order not to misunderstand such strange verses as Ecclesiastes 7:16--"Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself?" How to understand the intention of this and other strange verses (when taken out of context) will be considered in Lessons 4 and 5.

The Book of Job: Wisdom Through Suffering

Lessons 6, 7, and 8 will be devoted to this book, which deals with one of the most profound questions asked by humans: Why do people, especially good or innocent people, suffer? "Theodicy" is the philosophical term used to refer to the ancient and modern problem of the existence of pain and other evils, especially as the existence of evil creates a problem for believing in both the omnipotence and the goodness of God. If God is all-powerful, he could prevent "bad things happening to good people"; why does he not do so? If he could but

does not prevent or deliver from pain and suffering, is it because he does not really care?

This is an old *philosophical* problem for belief in the existence of an all-powerful and benevolent God, but more importantly it is a *religious* question which many people have asked out of their own pain--"Why has God let this happen (or done this) to me?" What does it mean to be a person of faith in the midst of suffering? Since this is a question which people often have reason to ask, we should be grateful for the book in the Bible which most clearly raises the issue, not in the abstract but in the case of a particular individual, Job.

One of the chief benefits of familiarity with the book of Job is the added perspective it gives us for the reading of Proverbs. It becomes clear that individual proverbs cannot be invoked as formulas or incantations which assure certain results. We will see that an overly simplistic reading of Proverbs could put us in the seat of Job's "comforters," who diagnosed his situation incorrectly and gave him lots of erroneous advice.

Summary Comparison and Perspective

This series will provide just a brief overview of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. For purposes of comparison, the characterization of each book will naturally be somewhat simplistic, as we will not be able to take into account the subtle details of the material. Nevertheless, it is beneficial (though somewhat superficial) to describe the thematic tone of the three wisdom books as follows:

> Proverbs tells us that life can be good
> if we do the right thing (i.e., the wise thing).
>
> Ecclesiastes tells us that life will end
> no matter what we do.
>
> Job tells us that life can be painful
> even if we do the right thing.

Just from these simple (but essentially accurate) descriptions, you can see that these books provide contrasting perspectives. They can even be described as "in tension" with one another. Each is part of the inspired Word of God, however, and each is needed for our nurture and direction as believers.

Into the overview of each we will also bring perspectives provided by the totality of Scripture, especially the Christ-centered perspective from the New Testament. On the one hand we want to let these books speak for themselves (within the limited scope of this course); on the other hand we cannot forget that we are *Christian* readers or we will forfeit an important advantage given to us as readers of OT wisdom: For Christians, Jesus has become "for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). That does not mean we can ignore the OT wisdom books and just read the Gospels; rather it means that *Jesus gives focus* for our reading of all the Bible, including these books from the OT. If we want to learn "wisdom from God" we will want

to relate the things we see in the wisdom books to the person and ministry of Jesus. Our perspective on the knowledge of God and the ways of God must be informed by the focus given in the incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, and by the subsequent gift of the Holy Spirit.

We know from the famous prologue to John's Gospel (John 1:1-18) that Jesus is the eternal Word of God made flesh (vss. 1, 14). That means that Jesus, as the Word, is the Wisdom of God articulated, expressed, or spoken. Just as Jesus is the Word of God incarnate, he can be said to be the Wisdom of God incarnate, i.e., the perfect expression of God's Wisdom embodied in human form. One of the OT prophecies about the coming of the Messiah was thus fulfilled:

> A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse [David's father],
> and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
> The Spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
> the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
> the Spirit of counsel and might,
> the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
> His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. [Isa. 11:1-3a]

This prophecy obviously connects the presence of wisdom with the presence of the Spirit of God. Jesus' incarnation was a work of the Holy Spirit, and he was anointed by the Holy Spirit for his ministry (Luke 1:35; 4:18-21, where Jesus claims Isa. 61:1-2a is fulfilled in him). Isaiah 11 also mentions certain effects as the marks of true, spiritual wisdom. Notice how "the fear of the LORD" is emphasized by repetition. As we will see in Lesson 2, the appropriate "fear" or reverence of God is an essential component of biblical wisdom.

We will have further occasion to comment on the parallels between Wisdom and Jesus especially in Lesson 3.

[Note to the teacher: I include the following mostly for your information. You may or may not find it useful, and I do not expect you to spend time trying to explain this to the classes, except as it may prove helpful in dealing with some particular verses.]

Characteristics of Poetic Material in the Old Testament

About one-third of the text of the OT is written in poetic form. Poetry is used for many of the prophets' words, in addition to the Psalms, Job, the Proverbs, and the Song of Solomon. Some appreciation for the nature of poetry in the Old Testament is helpful for any reader of the Bible, even if the technical details lie beyond our knowledge or interest. This is especially so when the poetic form itself is important to the way the truth is stated.

Hebrew poetry in the OT is quite different from the Western poetry with which we are familiar. Even read in Hebrew, there is virtually no rhyme, and meter is not a dominating characteristic (when present at all). Naturally these would not be discernible in English translation anyway. The most important feature of Hebrew poetry, however, is very discernible even in English translation, for the main characteristic of this poetry is *parallelism of thought*.

Western poetry tends to strive for a balance in sound (by rhyme, rhythm, or both). Ancient Hebrew poetry prefers balance in ideas or thoughts. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways; thus there are several types (and combinations of types) of parallelism to be found in OT poetry. The types listed below, with examples, are simply the most important for purposes of interpretation.

1. **synonymous parallelism**: The second line of a verse (and sometimes a third line) essentially repeats the first line's thought, using different words but communicating the same concept or idea. This type of parallelism is fairly easy to spot and is very frequent.

Recognition of synonymous parallelism will help you avoid erroneous, artificial distinctions in certain contexts. For example, look at Psalm 103:10. This verse has "sins" in one line and "iniquities" in the next. Are these terms different? Perhaps they are in some contexts, but in this verse the basic thought of line one is being reiterated by line two. Questions about the difference between sin and iniquity would miss the point in this context. Recognition of synonymous parallelism can also shed light on the relationships among some very important terms such as *justice*, *righteousness*, and *salvation*. For some examples of synonymous parallelism, see the following:

Amos 5:21-24
Isaiah 51:5, 6, 8
Psalm 51:3

2. **antithetic parallelism**: The second line contrasts with the first. Proverbs 10:7 contrasts the "memory" of the righteous person with the "name" (or reputation) of the wicked. The second line gives the contrasting picture, which serves to reinforce the first line's point. For other examples, see:

Proverbs 3:5 (trust in the Lord, not your own insight)
Proverbs 10:1, 2 (You can find many examples in Proverbs 10.)
Matthew 7:18 (good tree, bad tree)

3. **synthetic parallelism**: The second line advances the thought of the first by providing more information or drawing a conclusion from it. Notice in the following examples how the second line does not repeat the thought of the first line, nor does it contrast with it. Still, the content of the second line is linked to the first by referring to something contained in it.
Proverbs 18:10, 21

4. **emblematic parallelism**: One line is figurative (not necessarily the first) and the other line tells you what the pair of lines is actually about. Proverbs 25:14 paints a word picture of clouds and wind which fail to bring rain, but the point of the verse concerns false boasting, not weather patterns. See these other examples:
Proverbs 25:18
Proverbs 25:28 (and other examples in Prov. 25)
Psalm 42:1

5. **stairlike** or **climactic parallelism**: Repetition and development in successive lines. Some examples become obvious only in careful, perhaps repetitive reading. Notice Psalm 98:4-6 for an example of this (and you could add verses 7-9 as well). Other examples, because of more repetition of the same words, are more obvious. For examples of this, see:
Psalm 29:1-2, 3-9
Proverbs 30:4

The types of parallelism listed above are the most frequent and the most important for being able to appreciate and interpret the poetry of the Old Testament. This feature of Hebrew poetry can be explored to much greater depth than is needed for our present purposes. Suffice it to say that the Old Testament contains some technically sophisticated poetry. The psalmists and prophets spoke not only with great feeling as they were moved by the Holy Spirit; they manifested great skill in their use of language. Further study in this area of Hebrew poetic structure would only deepen your appreciation of the beauty, as well as the truth, of God's Word. For the purposes of this course, these main types of parallelism may prove useful in some of the passages we will study.

Note: Scripture quotations in these lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise indicated.

Lesson 2
Proverbs: Wisdom Through Observation

The Origin of the Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs is associated with King Solomon, "son of David, king of Israel" (Prov. 1:1). Solomon himself is surely responsible for many of the individual proverbs and perhaps for the basic format of the book. It is clear, however, that this collection includes the contributions of others (such as Agur and Lemuel; see 30:1 and 31:1). Solomon may have been the instigator or inspiration for beginning the collection, but "the officials of King Hezekiah" (25:1) would have done their work about 200 years later. No matter how many made contributions to the book, Solomon's God-given wisdom and insight (1 Kings 3:5-14, 28; 4:29-34; 10:3-7), marked him as the greatest OT example of wisdom. (The greatest NT example is Jesus, the Word of God Incarnate.)

Thus the Book of Proverbs has its origin in people who made wise observations on life, and Solomon is pre-eminent among them. Of course, we also must say that Proverbs has its origin in God, the Source of all wisdom and the true inspiration for all of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16-17), including the Proverbs. Putting together the contributions of people, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and the crucial role of experience, we could say that, in the Book of Proverbs, God gives us instructions through the exhortations and wise observations of human beings. Here is the voice of human experience, filtered through God's Spirit and seen in the light of God's Word.

Reading the Proverbs

For optimal use of the Book of Proverbs, it is helpful to be aware of some matters of style and format. For example, this book contains some sections of continuous teaching (the famous part on the "virtuous woman," for example, 31:10-31), but a great deal of the book is given over to individual wise sayings or teachings. In much of the book, therefore, one verse may not have a direct relationship to the preceding verse or to the following verse. This makes context a different kind of concern in the major portion of Proverbs than it is in most of the Bible.

For many individual proverbs, the context is the proverb on its own, without necessary reference to the verses before or after it. For example, see 10:14, which has no necessary relationship to verse 13 or verse 15. The order could have been entirely different and it would make no difference to the interpretation of the verses. In some sections of Proverbs, however, context must be considered as it is elsewhere in Scripture. Verse 13 of chapter one, for example, has to be understood as part of the deceitful inducement of the wicked (vss. 11-14).

The majority of the book is composed of individual proverbs, which are concise observations or exhortations, usually about one very specific issue. For example, Prov. 11:23 contrasts the future of the righteous with that of the wicked; 11:2 contrasts humility and pride. Such contrasts are abundant in the book, but many verses paint a simpler picture, without providing a contrast (e.g., 16:24).

The contrasting pictures are often put in "antithetic parallelism" (see Lesson 1), in which one line of the verse gives one scenario and the other line

provides the contrast. For example, see 10:23--"Doing wrong is like sport to a fool, but wise conduct is pleasure to a person of understanding." This verse is both an observation on the ways of two different kinds of people and an implied exhortation to be careful about what we find enjoyable and entertaining.

Throughout Proverbs, in the individual proverbs as well as the longer discourses, the words are written in poetic form. Just as in our own poetry, Hebrew poetry employs a lot of figurative language (not meant to be taken literally but to provide a mental picture for the sake of comparison or emphasis). See for examples these words from Proverbs 10:

"The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life" (vs. 11)
"The wealth of the rich is their fortress" (vs. 15)
"The tongue of the righteous is choice silver" (vs. 20)
"Like vinegar to the teeth, and smoke to the eyes,
so are the lazy to their employers." (vs. 26)

A very important example of figurative language early in the book is where wisdom is spoken of as a woman (e.g., 1:20ff.; 3:13-18; 8:1-36; 9:1-6; compare 9:13-18). This kind of figurative language is known as "personification," when a quality or some other non-human entity is spoken of as though it were a person. The writer of these passages did not intend for us to understand that there actually is a female who *is* Wisdom. The intention, rather, is to *picture* wisdom as though wisdom was a person. The reason for doing this is to make the presentation vivid, to appeal to the imagination.

Recognizing the poetic form and the frequent use of figurative language is helpful, but the most important factor in the appropriate interpretation of Proverbs will be the concern of the rest of this lesson. The intended purpose can be discerned by a brief study of the opening chapter of the book. (Note the appended questions which could be useful in your presentation.)

The Nature and Purpose of the Proverbs: God Wants to Give Wisdom (Proverbs 1)

Proverbs gives its own introduction and explanation of its purpose in the opening verses of the first chapter (quoting from the New Revised Standard Version):

For learning about wisdom and instruction ["discipline"--NIV],
for understanding words of insight,
for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
["a disciplined and prudent life"--NIV],
righteousness, justice, and equity;
to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young--
Let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,
to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles [Prov. 1:2-6].

Notice that the stated intention is to *give instruction*, to promote discipline and discernment--especially for the young but also for the more experienced. What is implicit throughout the Bible is here made explicit: *God wants to give us wisdom for living.* Some of the more important elements in biblical wisdom are mentioned in this passage:

"Instruction" or "discipline" (vs. 2) is the Hebrew word *musar*. This can also be translated as "self-control," which we know from the New Testament is one of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). Indeed, the truly spiritual understanding of "discipline" or "self-control" requires the activity of the Holy Spirit within us. We will not get the right kind of self-control out of our willpower, unaided by the Holy Spirit.

"Righteousness" (vs. 3) refers to right relationship with God, as shown by right living and right relationships with other people. "Justice" (vs. 3) is an important OT word (*mishpat*), which can be described as "God's righteous order" (i.e., when things are the way God wants them to be). In the biblical sense of the word, we cannot have true "justice" without God's will being done. It is not an impersonal balancing of the scales but a very personal will (God's) being done. "God's righteous order" is what we are praying for when we say, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That is truly a prayer for justice, which (as defined by God) means righteous justice.

The Book of Proverbs is intended to teach us the attitudes and behaviors which are consistent with true wisdom. True wisdom must be righteous and just; true wisdom must include self-control or discipline--which in Scripture means humble reliance on God and not autonomous isolation by an individual human being. God wants to give us this kind of wisdom. There is, however, no hint here of giving us guaranteed formulas for making life comfortable or successful by human standards, or for avoiding any and all troubles common to humanity.

If such a book of formulas did exist, we would not need to rely on God but simply on our application of the formulas. That would, in effect, be a contradiction of Proverbs 1:7--"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" ["discipline"--NIV]. If reverent fear of the LORD is the beginning and thus the most important single element in true wisdom, then we should dismiss from our minds any notions of achieving some level of "wisdom" or education and skill in living that would guarantee our success apart from the mercies of God. The beginning, the essence, the very heart of true wisdom is reverent dependence on Almighty God, the Source and Sustainer of life. Compare Proverbs 9:10--"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." Likewise, from the Bible's perspective, the "fool" is the person who thinks and acts as though "there is no God" (Psa. 14:1; 53:1).

Such a God-centered understanding of wisdom is completely different from the worldly "wisdom" which Paul critiqued in 1 Cor. 1:18-29. Worldly wisdom appeals to our pride and exalts our human powers to control our own destiny and be self-sufficient. Even within a religious setting, we can vainly imagine that wisdom will bring us closer to God, or perhaps impress God and win

his approval. It is very easy to imagine that our "wisdom" impresses others, if we are impressed with it ourselves! In contrast, a God-centered understanding of wisdom is exactly what we have in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, "who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (1 Cor. 1:30-31).

The person who is wise in the truly spiritual sense will boast in God, not in one's self. The wise person will boast about God, not self, and give glory to God, not self, because the wise person will know the degree of our dependence on God. A person who is wise in the true sense will know that God is our sufficiency ("competence," 2 Cor. 3:5-6; compare NASB). Jesus said about himself, "The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19). Because we follow the example of Jesus in depending on the Father (and on the Spirit), we listen, read, and give heed to his words, which he generously offers for our instruction. In the Book of Proverbs, God offers us wisdom, but if we do not hear it and receive it as the wisdom which depends on God, we will mishear it and distort it.

God-centered wisdom is recognized as a gift from God and not as a human achievement (see James 1:5; cf. Jere. 9:23-24). To say that it is a gift does not mean that we do not need to study or put forth effort. It means that diligence is rewarded, but only because God is generous (not obligated). If we seek wisdom as Scripture defines it, we will welcome God into our lives to be Lord of our destinies. Where God is present, there is wisdom, for God brings wisdom with him. Human-centered wisdom cannot bring us to God, but God-centered wisdom is the result of allowing God's active presence in our lives (compare 1 Cor. 1:21 and Col. 3:16)

More of the true nature of biblical wisdom can be seen by reflecting on the warnings contained in the second half of Proverbs 1. The alternative to seeking wisdom is described in terms of violent, selfish behavior--those who "ambush the innocent" (vs. 11); those who go after "booty" (vs. 13). Those who are fools in the biblical sense are not lacking in *mental* capacity; they are in error *morally*, for "their feet run to evil, and they hurry to shed blood" (vs. 16). Not because they are *mentally* "slow" but because they are *morally* corrupt, they "set an ambush--for their own lives!" (vs. 8).

The foolish are sternly condemned, not for lack of educational opportunity but for refusing the opportunities at which they scoffed. To these scoffers, the voice of wisdom gives warning: "Because I have called and you refused, have stretched out my hand and no one heeded, because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you, . . ." (1:24-26). Just as in Romans 1:18-23, the root problem of foolish humanity is identified as the refusal to deal honestly and humbly with *available truth*, especially the truth about God: Calamity will come to those who "hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD" (Prov. 1:29; cf. Psa. 14:1). With God-given power to choose, humans can destroy themselves by refusing to listen to God's wisdom. Thus it is "the complacency of fools" which "destroys them" (Prov. 1:32). In contrast, the voice of wisdom

offers those who will give heed a "secure" future, "at ease, without dread of disaster" (1:33).

In Lesson 1 of this series, the Book of Proverbs was characterized as having this overall theme or tone:

Proverbs tells us that life can be good
if we do the right thing (i.e., the wise thing).

Admittedly this is a simplistic description of a long book with a lot of different facets, but one word of that description was chosen with special care: the word "can." Life *can* be good, if the wisdom found in Proverbs is followed. We could have said that life *will* be good if Proverbs is heeded, but we would have to qualify that statement very carefully, with words like "eventually" or "in the eternal perspective of things." Adding words like that, however, would be relying on perspectives learned from other parts of Scripture (especially the New Testament). With more simplicity and accuracy we could say that if the wisdom of Proverbs is *not* followed, life will *certainly* not be good in the ways that count the most. But following the wisdom of the Book of Proverbs does not provide insulation from all the troubles of this world.

We could also say with great confidence that anyone's life will be better, more effective, and less prone to disaster, if that person heeds the Book of Proverbs. What we cannot say, without further explanation, is that Proverbs provides guaranteed or "foolproof" guidance for making life come out right in the near term. The nature of biblical wisdom is not what could be called "recipe knowledge" for dealing with life's challenges. The wisdom taught here calls for more than mechanical adherence to ordained operating procedures. The Book of Proverbs is a book of instructions, but not a book of guaranteed results.

The fundamental insight reflected in Proverbs' wisdom is that *actions have consequences*. If we want good consequences, we should pursue the path of right action. What is not so evident in Proverbs but is evident in Job (and in other Scriptures as well as in our lives) is that all *consequences have causes but we are not in control of all causes*. Indeed, sometimes we cannot even see the causes behind the painful consequences with which we have to deal. We put the Book of Proverbs to best use when we allow it to teach us the kind of actions and attitudes which will help us move toward the consequences we desire. Using the Book of Proverbs to analyze how someone got their consequences is a bit more dangerous because we may not have knowledge of all the causes at work in their situations.

Recognizing that Proverbs is a book of instructions and not guarantees is quite important in reading and using the book. Often people read and quote the book as though it is a book of promises. As we will see later in this series, that kind of viewpoint could easily put us in the position of Job's "comforters," whose erroneous diagnosis of Job's troubles could find proof-texts in Proverbs! (See Proverbs 12:21. If this was all we knew to say about suffering, we would have to agree with Job's friends when they accused him of deserving his troubles.) Great and unnecessary difficulty can arise whenever life experience does not match what we thought was promised. Just because we "claim" something as a promise does not mean that it *is* a promise, and it certainly does not obligate God to treat it

as a promise! Rather than reading Proverbs as promises, we will find it is intended to be a book of wisdom, a book of instruction which we should heed if we desire our lives to be fruitful and pleasing to God.

[Proverbs are not to be confused with promises. While promises are statements that God guarantees, proverbs only state what generally happens. Proverbs do not necessarily guarantee that in every case the supposed result of an action will follow. Life is complex and the proverb is not. The proverb isolates just one digital aspect of truth. For example, to say that diligence always leads to wealth (cf. 10:4) is to ignore famine-stricken areas where people work very hard, yet despite all of their diligence remain in poverty. Proverbs are not promises!
--LessonMaker, Introduction to Proverbs]

Questions from LessonMaker software, by NavPress

OPEN IT

1. What makes a person foolish or wise?

2. Who is the wisest person you know?

EXPLORE IT

3. What three types of individuals are mentioned by Solomon? (1:1-7)

4. Where does wisdom come from? (1:7)

5. About what sort of enticements did Solomon warn us? (1:8-19)

6. What is the result of not accepting wisdom? (1:28-32)

7. What is the result of accepting wisdom? (1:33)

GET IT

8. How is the fear of the Lord the beginning of knowledge?

9. What does it mean to fear the Lord?

10. What type of knowledge and discipline do fools despise?

11. Why and how do people reject wisdom?

APPLY IT

12. What is one thing you can do this week to seek wisdom?

13. What negative influence (person or thing) can you remove from your life this week?

Lesson 3
Proverbs: Wisdom for the Wise Reader

A Simple But Complicated Book

Because the Book of Proverbs covers so many facets of human attitudes, actions, and interactions, it is impossible to summarize in a few words. Among the many topics touched on in the book are these (according to the "Introduction to Proverbs," in *LessonMaker*):

> The book of Proverbs deals with the order of the various realms of reality and calls for the student to search for, discover, and observe the patterns in every area of life. Because there is nothing beyond God's control, his domain must be observed first and foremost. The fear of God is the first principle of wisdom. Under God one must take into account the desires, character, and actions of the king. Relations with family and friends must also be cultivated and cared for. Finally, Proverbs addresses one's responsibility to servants, the poor, and widows, who come under God's protective umbrella. Personal character, values, and actions are polarized (wise vs. foolish; diligent vs. slothful; wicked vs. righteous; etc.) and tied to the consequences which follow each. The young person is taught and given experiences which dispel his naivete about certain base elements of life. The book begins with two women (Madame Wisdom and Madame Folly) vying for a young man's attention and embrace (Prov. 7-9) and ends with a beautiful description of what it is like to be married to Madame Wisdom (cf. 31:10ff.).

In the way specific topics are addressed in individual proverbs, the Book of Proverbs is simple. Because it touches on so many topics, however, the Book itself can hardly be said to be simple. In addition to the wide range of topics, the reading of Proverbs is complicated somewhat by the fact that it needs to be read in the light of all Scripture and in the light of eternity. Doing so will show us that the success mentioned so often in the Proverbs will sometimes have to be sought in eternity rather than demanded right now or in the immediate future. In other words, wisdom gained from other parts of the Bible is really needed in order not to misapply the wisdom found in Proverbs. It is also true that wisdom gained from life itself is necessary in order to fully appreciate and apply the wisdom of Proverbs. Consider, for example, Prov. 26:4-5:

> "Do not answer fools according to their folly,
> or you will be a fool yourself."
>
> "Answer fools according to their folly,
> or they will be wise in their own eyes."

These two verses, back to back, seems to contradict one another. What am I supposed to do? Should I answer a fool "according to his folly," or should I resolve not to do so? These two verses tell me to do both. Obviously it will require some wisdom to know *when* to apply verse 4 and when to apply verse 5. All of the wisdom of the book of Proverbs is like this to a certain extent. The

wiser the reader, the wiser will be the application of Proverbs. The question is, How can I become a wise reader?

Becoming a Wise Reader

Obviously there is no substitute for experience. The more experience of life one has, the more readily one should be able to appreciate the wisdom of Proverbs. We all know, however, that many people go through life having all kinds of experiences but not seeming to learn from them. Age does not always bring greater wisdom. As we sometimes say, some people become bitter while others become better. So much depends on our responses to life, and not simply on what experiences we have had. Some learn; others refuse and rebel against the lessons of life and of God's Word.

The reason some rebel and others grow is that some refuse to change while others accept the changes that God works in those who submit to his ways. Acquiring "wisdom" in the biblical sense is not so much a matter of acquiring knowledge or skill (in the sense of "knowing how to") as it is a matter of the kind of person you are becoming. It is mostly a matter of what you are allowing to shape your life--God's ways and priorities instead of your appetites or fears. Seen in the light of all Scripture, and especially in light of the supreme example of godly wisdom, Jesus Christ, "wisdom" can only mean living in fellowship with God and allowing his will to be the sole resource, reason, and goal for our lives. That means allowing ourselves to be changed as God's directs. Instead of always trying to manipulate the world and people around us to accommodate our own agendas, we yield to God's agenda and let him change us.

The Wise Reader Looks to God

In view of the above, Proverbs 3:5-8 can serve as a key passage for guiding the way we read the whole Book of Proverbs (and the whole Bible, for that matter):

> "Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
> and do not rely on your own insight.
> In all your ways acknowledge him,
> and he will make straight your paths.
> Do not be wise in your own eyes;
> fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.
> It will be a healing for your flesh
> and a refreshment for your body."

True wisdom is completely different from self-reliant cleverness or human strategies for getting our own way. True wisdom is walking in the way God directs, trusting in him, yielding to his agenda, and refraining from the evil which naturally accompanies self-centered motives. If you "trust in the LORD with all your heart" it will have good effects in your whole being--"your flesh and . . . your body." But the well-spring of renewal and healing is God himself, not the mechanical application of principles apart from personal relationship and trust.

Further insight on the kind of wisdom extolled in Proverbs can be found by referring to the NT Book of James, which has been called "a New Testament wisdom book." Briefly compare James 1:5-8 with 4:7-8. We can ask our generous heavenly Father for wisdom, but we need not expect to receive it if we are "double-minded." Being double-minded in the Book of James means having mixed motives about whether we want to please God or just serve our selfish interests. Double-mindedness is a defilement of the heart (i.e., our affections and motivations) from which we have to be cleansed by repentance: "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:7-8). This echoes the exhortation of Proverbs 3:5-8, quoted above. (See also James 3:13-18.)

In Proverbs and in James, the wisdom of God is for those with single-minded motivation to please God, i.e., for those who "fear God" (as in Prov. 1:7; 9:10). Double-minded people are not necessarily opposed, overtly, to pleasing God. At times they may even have a fairly strong desire to please God, as long as it doesn't cost too much or interfere too much with desires for comfort or self-advancement. Such persons, however, will not be able to appropriate the Bible's wisdom but will instead find frustration, for the "wisdom" they obtain from Scripture will not easily fit into their agendas. The Bible's kind of wisdom is for the "pure in heart," for those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (cf. Matt 5:3, 8). The wise reader of Proverbs (and all of the Bible) is the reader who fears God, who wants more than anything else to please God, even to the point of sacrificing selfish pleasures and satisfactions.

Wisdom Seen in Jesus

This is the wisdom Jesus demonstrated, as mentioned in Lesson 1 in connection with Isaiah 11:1-3a. Jesus showed in his every activity and spoken word "the fear of the LORD" which characterizes true wisdom. Jesus' own testimony about himself centered on his trust in and reliance on the will of the Father: "the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19).

If Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God, willingly claimed such dependence on the Father as the key to his life and ministry, we certainly should not be ashamed to admit our needs and limitations. Jesus taught us to follow his example and to acknowledge the priority of God's kingdom and will over our own agendas--in the Lord's Prayer, in Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39), and even on the cross itself (Luke 23:46). In going through with the crucifixion, Jesus showed the ultimate example of what it means to "trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight" (Prov. 3:5). By doing so, Jesus also demonstrated that such trust is indeed the path to "healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body" (Prov. 3:8). Jesus' trust in the Father led *through* the crucifixion *to* the resurrection. In an awe-inspiring way, Jesus is the ultimate example of godly wisdom as taught in Proverbs 3:5-8, but Jesus is even more than an example.

Jesus Is God's Wisdom

Lesson 1 touched on 1 Corinthians 1:30, in which Jesus is described by Paul as our "wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption." Paul was making that statement in the context of criticizing the world's version of "wisdom," which exalts humans and misses God's will. But there is a great deal more to the equation (Jesus = Wisdom) than meets the eye of the casual reader of that passage. Greater awareness of the significance of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs will enrich our understanding of Paul's statement.

Mention has been made previously of the way wisdom is *personified* in certain portions of Proverbs. "Wisdom" is presented in Proverbs 1 as a woman issuing an invitation to those willing to learn (1:20-33). This figurative language is picked up again in 3:13-20, where the pronouns "her" and "she" refer back to "wisdom" in vs. 13. ["Wisdom" or *chokma* (pronounced "kokma") is a feminine noun in Hebrew; hence the feminine pronouns. The feminine gender here is a grammatical distinction, not a biological one! Note how the Spanish language utilizes grammatical gender in a similar way: *pelo* is a masculine word for "hair" in Spanish, whether the hair of a man or woman. *Mesa* is a feminine word for "table," no matter who made the table or who sits at it.] In Prov. 3:13-18, wisdom's benefits are contrasted with the temporary and limited value of gold and silver, because wisdom "is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her" (3:18). Then a very important new thought is introduced in the next two verses.

We are told in 3:19 that "the LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens." The wisdom which has already been commended to the reader of Proverbs is here being ascribed to God himself. Thus, when we seek wisdom from God, we seek that very quality by which God was able to make the universe. The wisdom we seek is at least as old as the universe because God used it in creation.

Wisdom is personified as feminine again in Proverbs 4:5-13 and in 7:4. But the most important passage for this personification (and the most difficult and controversial) is Prov. 8:1-9:12, especially 8:22-31. In the first twenty-one verses of the chapter, personified wisdom invites us to receive instruction and promises blessings if we do. This much is similar to 1:20-33 and 3:13-18. But in 8:22-31, we return to the topic of wisdom's presence and participation at the creation of the universe.

We immediately encounter controversy over how to translate the first line of vs. 22. The New Revised Standard Version has "The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago." The New International Version has "The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work, before his deeds of old." In the margin, the NIV has "The LORD brought me forth" instead of "The LORD possessed me."

The focus of uncertainty is how to translate the Hebrew word *qanah*, which usually means "get" or "acquire" (cf. Gen. 4:1; 14:19, 22; and Exod. 15:16). Significantly, Prov. 8:22 does *not* use the word *bara*, the OT's word for the kind of creating or making that only God can do (as in Gen. 1:1 and elsewhere). Since *bara* is absent from Prov. 8:22, it seems fair to say that the

NRSV has unnecessarily confused matters by using the word "created." It seems better to follow the NIV on this verse. Then the meaning would be that *God had wisdom before he had a universe*. Indeed the universe had a beginning, but before "the beginning" of Gen. 1:1, God had wisdom to do all that Gen. 1:1 mentions. Before God created the heavens and the earth, he already knew how. He did not get wisdom by doing it. That means that *God's wisdom is not at all dependent on the universe*, but rather that *the universe is completely dependent on God's wisdom*.

[Even if we stick with the dubious NRSV translation of verse 22, the meaning in context would be much the same, although it would be possible for someone to ask, "By what wisdom did God create wisdom?" Furthermore, the idea of God creating wisdom opens the door for further speculations which caused problems in the fourth and fifth centuries of the church, when the exact nature of Jesus' relationship with the Father was being worked out in church councils. See the Nicene Creed for the result, which was not achieved easily.]

The question of wisdom's origin could also be raised by the wording of vs. 24: "When there were no depths I was brought forth" (NRSV). The NIV has "I was given birth" (in both vss. 24 and 25). In this instance, the NRSV (and the NKJV) seem preferable, although the NIV's translation is possible. Even if we do go with the NIV, we need to remember that the "birth" being referred to is not the same as a human being born. Contextually, there is no question about there being any time before wisdom existed. The whole point of this passage, 8:22-31, is that *there never has been a time when God's wisdom did not exist*. [The Nicene Creed was specifically worded to deny the claim by some that "there was a time when he (Christ) was not."]

Wisdom's personification is presented so vividly in Prov. 8:22-31 that it comes close to being (without quite becoming) a "personality." For the Christian reader, there can be no question that what is said about wisdom here is what we say about Jesus Christ. So for us, this passage *is* about a person, but it is a person whose personality is revealed in the New Testament.

The reason I say that is because Prov. 8:22-31 was intended as a "personification" of a *quality* possessed eternally by God and offered to the humble who will listen to and obey God; that quality is wisdom. That quality becomes accessible to us *as a person* in Jesus, the Word of God made flesh in the incarnation. Thus we know that quality fully in *the person who is wisdom himself*, *Jesus*. That quality is not fully accessible to us apart from Jesus, although many people who are not Christians possess large measures of wisdom (real as well as false). [The quality of wisdom personified in Proverbs 8 is *not* accessible to us in a feminine image referred to as "Sophia." See the appendix of this lesson for more on this controversial topic, which might be safely avoided in Sunday School classes but may not be avoidable.]

Jesus as Wisdom in the New Testament

There are several passages in the New Testament where connections are made between wisdom and Jesus. Some of these are rather clear while others involve subtle echoes of Old Testament passages (and even intertestamental books such as Ecclesiasticus). Just a few of the more obvious passages will be mentioned here, and only briefly in order to establish the identification: Jesus = Wisdom.

Perhaps the most important passage does not even contain the word "wisdom." John 1:1-5 describes Jesus as the eternal Word of God through whom all things were created. This makes a clear connection with the Proverbs 8 passage at which we have been looking. Similar is Hebrews 1:1-3a. Other NT passages, such as Colossians 1:15-17, which credit Jesus with being the agent of creation, strengthen the identification of Jesus with the creative activity of wisdom described in Proverbs 8:22-31.

Another NT identification of Jesus with God's wisdom is startling in its clarity--once you see it by a comparison of two Gospel passages. In Luke 11:49-51, Jesus says that "the Wisdom of God" will send prophets and apostles, who will be persecuted and killed. In the parallel passage in Matthew 23:34-36, Jesus says, "I send you prophets, sages, and scribes" to be persecuted and killed. The words and actions of "Wisdom" in Luke are the words and actions of Jesus in Matthew. Jesus *is* Wisdom.

Yet another example, requiring still more digging, is Matthew 11:25-30. Jesus' exclusive knowledge of the Father (vss. 25-27) may sound somewhat like the supreme importance of wisdom in Proverbs, but it is actually vss. 28-30 which makes the connection with Wisdom more directly. If you will permit me a quotation from the intertestamental book Ecclesiasticus (also known as Sirach), you will see the parallels with Jesus' words in Matthew 11, as well as with the invitation of wisdom personified in the Book of Proverbs. Wisdom personified speaks:

> "Draw near to me, you who are uneducated,
> and lodge in the house of instruction.
> Why do you say you are lacking in these things,
> and why do you endure such great thirst?
> I opened my mouth and said,
> Acquire wisdom for yourselves without money.
> Put your neck under her yoke,
> and let your souls receive instruction;
> it is to be found close by.
> See with your own eyes that I have labored but little
> and found for myself much serenity."
> --Ecclesiasticus 51:23-27

Clearly Jesus' invitation in Matthew 11:28-30 to draw near, take the yoke, and find rest is essentially the same invitation, the invitation and promise of God's Wisdom. Jesus *is* God's Wisdom. [I do not intend by this quotation to endorse the intertestamental book with authority equal to the Old and New Testament books; that is not my place. It is interesting and very enlightening, however, to read Ecclesiasticus. Especially pertinent for the present topic is the extensive personification of Wisdom in chapters 1 and 24 of that book. The Wisdom of Solomon, also from the intertestamental period, is also valuable in this regard. See chapters 6-9 if interested.]

Jesus *is* God's Wisdom and therefore far greater than Solomon, the greatest Old Testament example of wisdom (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:31). Because Jesus is God's Wisdom, we have in him all the wisdom we need for our relationship with God and for our lives to be all that God intends them to be. "With all wisdom and insight [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, . . . set forth in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 1:8-9). Because we are connected to Christ who is the Wisdom of God, as the church we are where "the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Eph. 3:10). Indeed, Jesus himself is the one and only "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). Christians need to know that so that we will not be deceived by those who claim to offer wisdom/"sophia" in any other. Jesus *is* the Wisdom/Sophia of God.

Though unrecognized by "the rulers of this age" who "crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8), Jesus is the Wisdom of God and therefore infinitely wiser than those who claim wisdom and claim not to need the cross of Jesus (certain proponents of Sophia worship, to whom 1 Cor. 1:18-25 applies). The foolishness of humanity is never clearer than when rejecting the love and wisdom of God, demonstrated by Wisdom Himself, Jesus, when he died on the cross so that we could know and live with true wisdom forever.

Questions from LessonMaker software, by NavPress

OPEN IT

1. What makes someone successful in life?

EXPLORE IT

2. How should we trust in the Lord? (3:5-6)

3. What is the result of fearing the Lord and shunning evil? (3:7-8)

4. What is the relationship between wisdom and personal health? (3:8, 24)

5. What role did wisdom play in creation? (3:19-20)

6. What did wisdom say about her origin and her role in creation? (8:22-31)

GET IT

7. What do we need to do to receive the benefits of wisdom?

8. What does it mean to trust the Lord with all your heart?

9. What does it mean to shun evil?

10. How is hating evil fearing the Lord?

11. In what way is wisdom like precious metals and stones?

12. What types of things do people today value more than wisdom?

APPLY IT

13. What one thing can you do today to give wisdom its proper place in your life?

14. In what one area of your life in which you have not been trusting the Lord will you begin to trust Him this week?

15. What is something that you have mistakenly valued more than wisdom that you want to restore to its proper place?

Note to the teachers: The following appendix is a paper I wrote concerning the Re-Imagining Movement and their worship of Sophia instead of Christ, although they claim to be doing this in the name of Christianity. I thought you might find it helpful. I am not at all suggesting that you use it for teaching the class. Instead you should focus on the positive lessons about wisdom from Proverbs and how Jesus provides that reality to us. The paper on Sophia is not about Proverbs as such but about the controversy over Sophia and why Sophia worship is not Christian.

WHY NOT SOPHIA?
A Response to the Re-Imagining Movement
Dr. Arden C. Autry

In recent years considerable controversy has surrounded the actions of the so-called "Re-Imagining Conference." I have no intention to attempt here a critique of all that went on at the original conference nor in its follow up meetings. I want to address just one aspect of the conference: the use of "Sophia" as an icon or symbol to represent the divine in a way that would supposedly be more meaningful for women. The claim was made by some in the Re-Imagining Conference that they were simply re-claiming a neglected symbol from the Christian heritage, the figure of Sophia/Wisdom from the Book of Proverbs. The supposed benefit of invoking Sophia and singing her praises (instead of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) was to give women a liberating, feminine image of deity instead of the masculine ones (which have allegedly become tools of male dominance and oppression). Sophia was presented and used as an alternative name for God (or goddess).

There is no disputing that wisdom is figuratively represented as a woman in the early chapters of Proverbs (1:20ff.; 3:13-18; 8:1-36; 9:1-6; compare 9:13-18, where folly is likewise described as a woman). There should be, however, no confusion over the nature of the language used there. Wisdom is being "personified," spoken of *as though* wisdom were a person. Personification means to speak of or to speak to something which is not a person as though it is a person. Personification is an easily detected type of figurative language (see Psalm 114:3-6 and Judges 9:8-15 for other biblical examples), and it's a poor reader indeed who does not recognize such non-literal use of language. A quality can be spoken of as though it is a person; that does not mean that there is such a person.

The issue with re-imagination is not that their leaders are poor readers. They are quite sophisticated, in fact, and certainly know how to recognize personification when they see it in Proverbs. Neither is it the case that these persons have had a revelatory encounter with some goddess identifying herself as "Sophia." These "re-imagining" leaders do not think that there is a real person named Sophia (in the ordinary sense of "person"). Rather, they have fastened attention on a symbol. The fact that they can refer to Sophia/Wisdom as a biblical quality/"person" fits their agenda, which is to re-direct the Christian tradition in ways more accepting of their social, political, and philosophical goals.

The invocation of Sophia in ritual, prayer, and praise has nothing to do with such a goddess having made a revelatory appearance to these re-imaginative worshipers. It has everything to do with political expedience. By "political" here I do not mean the politics of voting for this or that party or candidate but rather the politics of influencing others and advancing an agenda in the culture. The particular sub-culture which Sophia worshipers want to influence is the Christian church.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with wanting to be politically influential, with wanting to influence others and advance an agenda. But an agenda can be wrong, and the methods used to advance it can be wrong. I think

the Sophia worshipers are wrong on their major thesis, and I think they are open to criticism on their method. Their method is wrong mostly because they do not see how wrong their agenda is, and they do not see what is at stake in their replacement of traditional formulations of worship and theology.

The subversive substitution of Sophia worship in place of worship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is intellectually naive or dishonest if it claims to be a legitimate development of the Christian heritage. It is not a development but an abandonment of the Christian faith. It cannot be a development of the Christian faith because it has abandoned the root of the faith, the foundation of the faith. That foundation is revelation.

Proponents of re-imagining understand religion (including but not limited to the Christian church) to be essentially a humanly produced set of beliefs and practices. In contrast, the church has historically claimed to base its beliefs and actions on *revealed* truth. The contrast is both radical and subtle.

It is radical because humanly produced concepts, institutions, and practices are naturally open to human revision, while divinely revealed truth would not be open to human revision. If human communities have produced their religious thinking and behavior, they can change it in whatever ways fit the purpose of the time. If we have "imagined" it, we can "re-imagine" it. On this premise, religion has been constructed with symbolic language and actions which were meaningful to the people who developed and propagated the religion. People will continue to adhere to and propagate such a faith only if it continues to be meaningful and useful to them. On the contrasting premise that religious teachings and actions are expressive of or responsive to divine revelation, usefulness to human beings is not, by itself, an adequate justification for revision of the language and practice of the religion. If God spoke these words and directed us to use certain words and actions, only God could change the instructions. Whether we regard the core doctrines, symbols, and actions of the faith to be divinely revealed or humanly produced makes for radically different evaluations of re-imagining activity.

On the other hand, the contrast is subtle because it is true that much of what Christians do is so affected by cultural, temporal, and humanly conditioned values that we have to sort out what can be revised from what cannot be revised without abandoning the essence of the faith. For example, can the Holy Scriptures be revised? It seems prudent to revise the translated text when the language needs to be updated to be understandable. Certainly the sacred text has to be translated from the original languages into the language of the people (according to the Christian faith, that is. Islam's view of the Koran is that, strictly speaking, it cannot be authoritatively expressed in any language other than the Arabic in which it was first written.)

Consider other examples: Can we write and sing new hymns for Christian worship? Can we change the time when worship services begin? These might be easy to answer (for most of us at least), but what about other issues, such as this: Can women be ordained to the ministry? I would argue (knowing some would disagree) that opening up ordination to women was a legitimate response to irreversible changes in cultural patterns. I would argue that this change in the

church's practice was not an abandonment of revealed truth but an adjustment of human practice based on changes in the human context.

But when an ordained woman or man preaches the church's gospel, what does she or he preach? What is the church's message about God's will for humanity? If we can legitimately change some things, can we change our basic message about who God is, how God wants humans to relate to divine purposes and to one another? To be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ, to be faithful to the historic confession of the Christian faith, we have to say that some things can be changed but some things cannot.

The evangelical Christian affirms that God's definitive and unsurpassable revelation has been given in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught us to address God as our Father. Jesus and his appointed apostles taught us to welcome the Holy Spirit (not the goddess Sophia) to empower us for proper relationships and mission among all the peoples of the world. Christian baptism is identification with the death and resurrection of the historical person, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Holy Communion is the acted-out remembrance of Jesus' saving death in the anticipation of his eventual return as the appointed and sole judge of all human beings. Certain words (such as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and certain symbolic actions are not subject to revision. *To change the center of our response to God to anything other than the revelation focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ is to change our religion.* I do not mean a change *in* the religion but a change to a *different* religion, no matter how many Christian artifacts (such as the Bible) are carried along in the move.

The re-imagining movement is overtly committed to the politically motivated revision of the heart of the religious symbol system which the church has historically employed in worship, witness, and in the articulation of our theology. The leaders of re-imagining are not coy about this revision; they freely admit that this is what they are doing. They think that what they are doing is good, because of the liberating, empowering effects they believe this will have, especially for women. Their actions and words cannot be understood unless we assume that they think what they are doing is going to be beneficial.

How could they think so? When their words and actions seem so destructive to an evangelical observer, how can the leaders of re-imagining think it is good? The answer to that question is found in recognizing that the two sides of this controversy are operating on entirely different assumptions concerning the nature of the Christian religion. The re-imaginers imagine that traditional *Christian symbols* (no matter how central they were in the past) *can be changed* to assist in the promotion of a social-political agenda. Even if evangelical believers can sympathize with aspects of that agenda, *evangelicals cannot accept the changing of revealed truth*, precisely because we believe it is revealed truth.

Evangelicals (with the church historically) maintain that the core of our beliefs--which form the foundation for our practices of worship--is *revealed* truth: God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--the Holy Trinity. The Father is known by reference to and relationship with Jesus Christ the Son. The true Spirit of God (as contrasted with many spirits which might be encountered or invoked) is known by reference to the revelation of God in Christ (1 John 4:1-3).

These are not just human ways of thinking about or "imagining" God. These are human ways of thinking *as instructed by divine revelation*. If my articulation of these beliefs is valid, it is validated by reference to divine revelation. If my articulation needs to be corrected, it can be further instructed to reflect divine revelation more accurately. If, on the other hand, there is no such thing as revelation, then my confession about God is no better or worse than that of any religious adherent or that of any non-believer. In that case, if religion is just a matter of "write it to suit yourself," then what will triumph in the end is not truth but power.

According to the Christian faith, God's revelation and saving work are focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Without that focus our worship cannot beclearly Christian and may be overtly anti-christian.

Lesson 4
Ecclesiastes: Wisdom Through Questioning

Introduction to Ecclesiastes

As with the Book of Proverbs, so with Ecclesiastes we are dealing with a book traditionally ascribed to Solomon, David's son who reigned over Israel at its greatest height of power. As with Proverbs, there is some room for questioning whether Solomon is the actual author or whether he served in some way as the "inspiration" for a later author's reflections on the issues dealt with here. A fair case can be made that the Hebrew found in the book comes from a later time than Solomon (900's B.C.), perhaps from as late as 300-200 B.C. Perhaps, as with Proverbs, Solomon got the book started but someone else completed it. It may be that Solomon was himself known to have uttered the famous refrain: "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity!" (NIV has "Meaningless!" instead of "vanity." That says it, but not as well, in my opinion.)

Who actually put the words down in their present form is not vitally important. That Solomon *could* have expressed the sentiments found in this book is somewhat more important, for the perspective of the book is that someone who had the opportunity--the resources and the time--has explored every available avenue in pursuit of "the good life" and has found it all to be "vanity" and "chasing after wind." Solomon is the best candidate in all of the Old Testament to have had such opportunities and the wisdom to reflect on the meaning (or meaninglessness) of all his experiences. Under his reign, Israel was peaceful, prosperous, and Solomon could afford the kind of life described in 2:10: "Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure." For our purposes, then, we will consistently refer to Solomon as the author of Ecclesiastes.

What's the Meaning of All This?

Most people, most of the time, give little thought to the meaning of "the big picture." Most people, most of the time, are focused on the next thing (or several things) they need or want to do. Philosophical reflection is not high on the agenda of men and women just trying to get through the day, just trying to get the crop in, just trying to escape or survive the ravages of war, famine, or disease. If thoughts about "the good life" occur to such people, it is that life could be good "if only . . ." or "once we get past this . . ." or "once we get this accomplished."

Even if we are not being pressed with emergencies or with the kind of daily dangers faced by our ancestors or by people in undeveloped regions of the world today, we still tend to think this way. We focus on accomplishing our next goal, whether that is a big work project, a big business deal, or just making it to the weekend so that we can relax and do what we really enjoy. We tend to project our thoughts into the future (realistically or fantasizing) and think that life will be satisfying when we have gotten that degree, that job, or that promotion, married (or divorced) that person, raised our children and seen them succeed, or whatever our current pre-occupation. The great service of Ecclesiastes is that it reports the experience and perspective of one who has seen his every earthly wish come true, and he has wisdom enough to see that humans long for more. We are participating in something of an illusion when we imagine that the

accomplishment of our temporal goals will satisfy the hunger in our hearts for eternity. (See Ecc. 3:11 in the NIV: "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.")

With resources and leisure time to pursue "happiness," Solomon has tried it all and found it "vanity." It has been said that Ecclesiastes, neglected though it is by most Bible readers, is the book that modern people need the most (Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989, p. 20). With unprecedented leisure and resources at the disposal of many people (not just powerful kings like Solomon), we have unprecedented freedom to pursue personal fulfillment. That in itself is a good thing, but we would do well to listen to a man who long ago tried to find fulfillment in all the ways we try. If he says "it doesn't work," we should hear him out. If we fail to heed his words of warning we will find ourselves repeating Solomon's experience of the ultimate meaninglessness of life's pursuits apart from God, the giver of life and all its good things.

Precisely because Ecclesiastes has so much to say to people who are entertaining ourselves to death, it is a book which is uncomfortable to read. But just like an unwelcome diagnosis from the doctor can lead to effective treatment which would otherwise be unsought, so Ecclesiastes can help to show us why we really do need a Savior--even when life is relatively easy--and why we really do need God's eternity to give significance to our short lives here in this age. To seek our total and genuine fulfillment in the material and temporal world is the delusion from which Ecclesiastes would deliver us.

Wisdom in Ecclesiastes

In Lesson 1 of this series, we said that Proverbs can be characterized in the following way:

> Proverbs tells us that life can be good
> if we do the right thing (i.e., the wise thing).

That is an oversimplification of a book with a wide range of interests. It is easier to characterize the Book of Ecclesiastes with much less fear of misrepresenting the contents:

> Ecclesiastes tells us that life will end
> no matter what we do.

Ecclesiastes is unrelenting in its purpose of relieving us of every illusion about what we can do to make life totally satisfying. That is the focus of wisdom in Ecclesiastes. Very unlike Proverbs, with its gems of advice on many topics, Ecclesiastes is not intended to give us confidence in the way we conduct our lives. Almost to the complete contrary, Ecclesiastes ruthlessly strips us of our superficial confidence and drives us to the conclusion finally reached by the book itself: "Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of

everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" (12:13-14). Rather than giving us all the answers, Ecclesiastes calls everything into question and tells us that we will have to give answers to God for what we have done with our lives. In the end, it is not our satisfaction with life that we should be concerned with; our concern should be whether God is satisfied with our lives.

In this light you can see an important point of continuity between Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. From the outset of Proverbs we are told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7). Ecclesiastes tells us that the fear of God is the only thing that matters in the end. That single emphasis in both books (although emphasized in different ways) stands in stark contrast to all the ways most people seek to make life good, worthwhile, and meaningful. In our society, perhaps many people would say that family values are what make life truly good (in contrast to more selfish interests). Perhaps many would say that what really matters is fulfilling your dreams, while others would say that serving others is more important and satisfying in the long run. But how many would say "the fear of God" is the first and last thing you need to be concerned with? If you stopped 100 people in the street and asked them, "What is the most important thing in life?"--how many of them would reply, "The fear of God"? Perhaps because we have not had the opportunities which Solomon had to "try it all," we are still living under the assumption that something besides the fear of God will fill our lives with meaning. But let's allow Solomon to tell us how he tried everything and found nothing satisfying. For this lesson we'll look just at the main thoughts of chapters one and two of the book.

Vanity of Vanities (1:1-11)

Solomon states his theme in verse two, with remarkable emphasis by repetition. The repetition itself is part of setting the tone. Everything just keeps on going but doesn't seem to be going anywhere! Generations come and go, but the earth remains (vs. 4). The sun rises and sets, only to do the whole thing over again tomorrow (vs. 5). The wind blows this way, then that way, never satisfied, never settled (vs. 6). All of these observations from nature are part of the answer Solomon seems to be offering to his question in verse two: "What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?" Doesn't all our human work end up the same as all these processes in nature--much activity but going nowhere except to keep going?

Verse seven is especially picturesque: "All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow." The words "not full" ("never full," NIV) reflect the whole experience of Solomon as described in this sobering book. The rich, resourceful king tried everything to fill his life, and it just did not seem to get full. "Not full"--what a description of human futility! Always going but never arriving. Always striving but never satisfied, at least not with lasting satisfaction. The wise man concludes:

"All things are wearisome;
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
or the ear filled with hearing" (vs. 8).

Just like the sea, we are "not full" and nothing we can obtain or experience with all our human resources will fill us to lasting satisfaction. And Solomon sees that this situation will never change, for "what has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun" (vs. 9). He is especially disheartened by reflecting on the fact that "the people of long ago are not remembered." Likewise, "people yet to come" and Solomon himself can expect no better treatment from future generations, each of which is on the way to oblivion like all those before (vs. 11).

Such a dreary outlook! The first eleven verses are enough to discourage any reader from proceeding further (unless that reader just naturally "enjoys" melancholy!). But we need to persevere. People of our time need more than ever to listen to what Ecclesiastes has to say. This is the wisdom of the wisest man in the Old Testament. If we choose to ignore him, we are fools indeed (not just ignorant by accident but unthinking by choice). In the remainder of chapter one and in chapter two, Solomon tells us the various pursuits in which he tried to find meaning and satisfaction. Truly, there is "nothing new under the sun," for these are the same pursuits in which people busy themselves in every generation.

Wisdom is Vexation (1:12-18)

Solomon applied himself "to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven." Remember that he had been granted extraordinary wisdom by the Lord, unequaled by anyone else in the OT (vs. 16 and 1 Kings 3:12). What did this great wisdom help him to see? "I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after the wind" (vs. 14). "Chasing after the wind" vividly pictures the attempt to do what cannot be done, to catch what will always elude us, to grasp what cannot be grasped. Furthermore, on reflection, the question could be asked, "What will you do with the wind if you catch it?" If wind could be chased down, subdued, and held, it would no longer be the wind. "Chasing after the wind" cannot succeed; it can only wear us out. Solomon sees that such is the nature of all human work "under the sun," including his own work of wise reflection on human labor! Solomon's wise thinking is also "chasing after wind" (vs. 17).

Why would Solomon call his wise insight "chasing after wind"? He tells us: "*For* [in the sense of "because"] in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow" (vs. 18). Solomon does not feel more fulfilled or satisfied because he sees the vanity of others' labors. To the contrary, he feels the vanity and futility of his own efforts at understanding. His life is sadder. He could feel that he might have been better off not to ask his questions, to have remained 'blissfully ignorant.' But once a thought has been thought, it cannot be unthought. Solomon's questions cannot be retracted once they have been asked. He has invested himself in seeking wisdom, and he cannot retrieve

the investment of time and effort. He can only comment on the unsatisfying return he has received on his unrecoverable investment. His recognition of vanity has not enabled him to escape vanity.

Pleasure is Vanity (2:1-11)

Next Solomon tells us about the futility he experienced in pursuit of pleasure. Because Solomon is famous for having so many wives and concubines (1 Kings 11:1-4), we might think first he is referring to sexual pleasure, but that is not what he mentions first. He refers to "laughter" and attempts to "cheer my body with wine" (vs. 3). He mentions his great building and landscaping projects: "I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees" (vss. 4-6).

Of course all of the really physical work for all these projects was done by his numerous "male and female slaves," who also handled the responsibility of looking after the king's vast "herds and flocks" (vs. 7). With all his great and growing treasures of gold and silver, Solomon could afford all the pleasures of having his own live entertainment anytime he desired from "singers, both men and women" (vs. 8). Finally, he mentions that he had "many concubines" (vs. 8). Solomon had many and varied appetites, not just sexual but also aesthetic, artistic delights. He could afford not to say no to any of his desires: "Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them" (vs. 10).

Solomon says that he "found pleasure" ["delight," NIV] in all these things which he built and acquired (vs. 10). The work did bring a certain kind of pleasure, no doubt the sense of accomplishment which we all find so gratifying. But *pleasure* is not the same as *lasting satisfaction*. After reflection, after the feeling of pleasure had faded or vanished altogether, Solomon says it was all "vanity and a chasing after the wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (vs. 11). What gave him pleasure failed to give him satisfaction. (The mighty 'river' of Solomon's grand reign flowed with great force through impressive scenery, but the 'sea' of his life was still "not full." See 1:7.)

It's interesting to note that twice in this passage Solomon mentions that he kept his wisdom through all of this building and acquiring (vss. 3, 9). He seems to mean that he kept his awareness and his reflective wits about him. He was noticing how these "pleasures" did and did not satisfy. There was genuine (if limited) good here; you could see why people want these things; but why do they not satisfy?

Wise or Foolish--All Die (2:12-17)

Perhaps if Solomon had not been so thoughtful he could have been happier, at least not so bothered by questions. Perhaps he could have wished that he could be less thoughtful, more carefree, so that he could enjoy life with more abandon. Don't we sometimes wish for "the good old days" when we were "carefree," perhaps when we were in school, before we got married and had children and other responsibilities such as work and mortgage payments? Solomon seems to have given some thought to such a possibility. In 2:12, he says

he "turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly." Since he would have no control over what his successor would do with all he had built up, perhaps he should just be carefree and give himself to "folly." (As it turned out, Solomon's successor, his son Rehoboam, made a pretty good mess of things, losing most of David's and Solomon's kingdom to a break-away led by Jeroboam. See 1 Kings 12, especially vs. 20.)

When he considered the alternatives--wisdom or folly--Solomon concluded that wisdom was far better, "that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness" (vs. 13). The wise can see where they're going, but "fools walk in darkness" (vs. 14). So wisdom is to be preferred; folly and mindless abandonment to pleasure are not a good option. Yet Solomon does not find peace in the clarity of this choice, for he is deeply troubled by the fact that "the same fate befalls them all" (vs. 14). I say 'deeply troubled' because Solomon returns to this realization about death over and over again in the book, and he ends the book with a sober reflection on the inevitability of death. But even without reading the rest of the book, you can hear the sadness in his words just in this section: "What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise? And I said to myself that this also is vanity" (vs. 15). The apparently great advantage of the wise over the foolish is temporary, for there is no lasting remembrance of either (vs. 16). So, Solomon says, "I hated life" (vs. 17). Wise though he was, rich though he was, blessed though he was with great opportunities to do great things and make a mark on his country, Solomon "hated life." Will that be the bottom line for him? If that is the bottom line for the man who had everything that most people could ever want, what hope is there for happiness?

Work is Worthless (2:18-26)

Not only did Solomon hate life, his dissatisfaction with life caused him to hate the work he had done which would make him famous and enviable by common people and rulers of his own time and later. He says, "I hated all my toil" (vs. 18). Solomon had wisdom enough to realize that at his death he would lose all control of all he had built (vs. 19). The realization brings to his lips yet again the famous refrain of Ecclesiastes: "Vanity" (or "meaningless" in NIV). He admits to feelings of "despair" (vs. 20) over the utter vulnerability of all his accomplishments. Once they become the property of others, who knows what will become of them (vs. 21)? Solomon calls this painful reality "vanity and a great evil" (NIV says "misfortune," but the word is literally "evil"). He sees that this must be true for everyone's work, not just his. What does anyone get out of their work, finally, except "pain" and "vexation" (vs. 23; NIV: "grief"). Even at night, after the work, there is no real rest for the mind. "Vanity" is all you can say for all this work, important or impressive though it might seem at the time to others. (See 1 Kings 10:6-9, and compare the Queen of Sheba's evaluation of Solomon's accomplishments with his own found here in Ecc. 2:18-23.)

Remember that this was a man who did not have to work to put food on the table. He could choose his activities, and he had all the resources imaginable at his disposal. He apparently liked staying busy with projects, such as the

magnificent temple he had built in Jerusalem. During his reign many other grand building projects were completed, so much that the people asked the next king to ease up on them a bit (1 Kings 12:4). Solomon did what all of us, in our own way, would like to do: he made a difference that outlasted his lifetime. We still refer to the temple as "Solomon's Temple," even though it's been gone for many centuries (it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army in 587 or 586 B.C., about 400 years after Solomon's reign). Yes, Solomon 'made his mark,' but it did not make him happy.

So what can this unhappy king do? What can anybody do? "Enjoy what you've got while you've got it!" is the basic meaning of vss. 24-26. There is nothing better for any of us than "to eat and drink, and find enjoyment" in our limited opportunities to be involved in productive activities (vs. 24). As we do these things, we should keep in mind that God is giving us these things and this time to enjoy them (vs. 25). Being mindful of God will give us "wisdom and knowledge and joy," and thus an advantage over "the sinner" who likewise works but without the awareness of God (vs. 26). But, since both righteous and sinner will eventually die and leave their wealth to others, "this also is vanity and a chasing after wind."

Lesson Summary and Further Reflections

We have not reached a satisfying conclusion if we have really been paying attention to Solomon thus far. His is a dismal testimony of trying it all and finding it all unsatisfying. He kept seeking "more" and finding it "not enough." It reminds me somewhat of the popular song of a few years back, "Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places." Solomon does not say he was looking for love, but he was looking for what people are really looking for when they are looking for love: he was looking for satisfaction and ultimate meaning in life. We could say he was looking for meaning in all the wrong places.

The things in which he busied himself were not necessarily evil in themselves--building projects, learning wisdom, and other good pursuits (even his harem was not considered wicked in his day, although he obviously carried this to unprecedented excess!). Why did they not make happy? The simplest answer is to say that these good things were never meant to be substitutes for God. Good things are from God, but they make lousy gods. They can make life more comfortable or pleasant, but things cannot give life or make life truly good. That's what Solomon was looking for and not finding.

In fact, Solomon's extraordinary gift of wisdom from God (Ecc. 1:16 and 1 Kings 3:12) made it certain that he would not be able to find satisfaction anywhere but in God. To a degree this is true for everyone, because "the spirit that [God] has made to dwell in us" (James 4:5) can find our true home only in God. Someone who has experienced the profound and evident work of God's Spirit, as Solomon had on more than one occasion, is all the more incapable of finding peace apart from God. Solomon's wisdom stayed with him through all his experiments with life (2:3, 9), so that he could see through the superficiality of what he was doing. This is like the incapacity that every true Christian has to be happy while harboring unconfessed sin in his or her life. The presence of God's

Spirit has brought a knowledge and experience of God which make it impossible to find peace apart from God's presence. If we can recognize the truth of Solomon's refrain--"Vanity, vanity! All is vanity!"--then we can also take refuge from this vanity in Jesus Christ, by heeding this exhortation from the Apostle Paul (Phil. 4:4-9):

> [4] Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. [5] Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. [6] Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. [7] And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
>
> [8] Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. [9] Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Praise God that we can have the peace that eluded Solomon, but notice that the peace "which surpasses all understanding" is found "*in Christ Jesus*." For us, just as surely as for Solomon, true and lasting peace is not to be found anywhere else.

Questions from LessonMaker software, by NavPress
Ecclesiastes 1:1-18 - Everything Is Meaningless

OPEN IT
1. What would you say is the purpose of life?

2. What is one thing that makes life worth living?

3. What sort of mindless activities do you enjoy? Why?

EXPLORE IT
4. What are some of the themes in these verses? (1:1-18)

5. What sweeping statement did Solomon make about life? (1:2)

6. What conclusion did Solomon reach about everything he had seen and done? (1:13-14)

7. To what had Solomon committed himself? (1:16-17)

8. What conclusion did Solomon reach concerning wisdom and folly? (1:17-18)

GET IT
9. Why was Solomon so dissatisfied with life?

10. When have you found the pursuit of knowledge to be burdensome?

11. To what sort of meaningless activities do people commit their life?

12. In what way does increased wisdom and knowledge bring increased sorrow and grief?

13. If we cannot find meaning in the pursuit of knowledge, in what can we find meaning and satisfaction in life?

APPLY IT
14. What is one meaningless activity you need either to eliminate totally from your life or to reduce the amount of time you spend doing?

Ecclesiastes 2:1-26 - Pleasure, Wisdom, Folly, Toil

OPEN IT

1. Why do you think the entertainment industry (movies, television, etc.) is such a booming business?

2. What priority do you think a person should give to leisure and fun?

EXPLORE IT

3. What sort of activities did Solomon find meaningless? (2:1-26)

4. How did Solomon try to cheer himself? (2:3)

5. What conclusion did Solomon reach when he considered all he had achieved? (2:11)

6. What did Solomon say would be the fate of the fool and the wise person? (2:15-16)

7. Why did Solomon hate life and all the things for which he had worked? (2:17-21)

8. In what did Solomon say a person should find satisfaction? Why? (2:24)

9. What do we require to find enjoyment? (2:24-25)

GET IT

10. When does pleasure become meaningless or even harmful?

11. What sorts of distractions do you pursue to give your life meaning or significance?

12. To what extent are the fates of the fool and the wise the same?

13. Why did Solomon conclude that a person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his or her work?

APPLY IT

14. What is one thing you can do to find satisfaction in your work this week?

15. How do you need to re-prioritize your commitment to pleasure in light of its unimportance?

Lesson 5
Ecclesiastes: The Bottom Line of Time and Eternity

"What's the bottom line?" is not the wording used by Solomon, but that is his question. After all is said and done, so what? What will it amount to? What's the meaning of it all? What's the real cost, and is it worth it?

Time and Eternity 3:1-15

From the first two chapters, which we looked at in the previous lesson, you can see how Solomon had reached an impasse in trying find lasting meaning and satisfaction. In 3:1-8, we find one of the more beautiful passages in the book, and perhaps one of the better known. These verses have teaching value in themselves and could remind us of the kind of thoughtful observations we find in Proverbs. In the context of Ecclesiastes, however, the significance of these verses is more negative than appears at first glance. "There is a time for every matter," in this context, means that nothing can last. No matter what we're involved in now, no matter what we enjoy doing--no activity will go on indefinitely, for we are going to die.

Read by themselves, verses 1-8 have a pleasing rhythm. Consolation might even be found in the fact that the time for killing (vs. 3), the time for tearing (vs. 7), and the time for war (vs. 8) are balanced by the time for healing, the time for sewing or mending, and the time for peace. In the context of Ecclesiastes, however, what you are really hearing is "tick, tick, tick." The clock is ticking on all human activities and during all human activities. The clock is ticking on nations; the clock is ticking on you and me. Solomon heard the clock ticking (even though clocks had not yet been invented!). The passing seasons and temporal activities will come to an end for every person, and then what?

You see the point of Solomon's litany in verses 1-8 only when you get to verse nine: "What gain have the workers from their toil?" Having gone through all the planting, plucking, killing, healing, breaking, building, weeping, laughing, mourning, dancing, etc., etc., etc., what do we end up with? God has made everything "suitable" (or "beautiful," NIV) "for *its time*" (vs. 11). And God has given human beings "a sense of past and future" (NRSV), or as the NIV puts it: God has "set eternity in the hearts of men" (vs. 11). Whether we go with the NRSV or the NIV (which I like better on this verse), the significance of the statement is the same: God has given human beings awareness of the temporary nature of everything we do, and awareness of the temporary nature of our very own lives. We have a sense of time and eternity, even though we cannot see or understand the beginning or the end of God's works (vs. 11).

That's our dilemma: we have a sense of something greater than we can grasp. When we look with wisdom at the universe we inhabit, or even just at our own lives and their seasons, we have to ask "why?" We have to ask this question because we were made with a built-in need for a sense of purpose. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon is guiding us through a profound search for that purpose. He is looking for it in all the things to which we give ourselves, and he's coming up empty. So he has to conclude, for now at least, that the best humans can do with all these temporary seasons of life is "to be happy and enjoy themselves *as long as they live*" (vs. 12). In contrast to the finite lives of humans, "whatever

God does *endures forever*; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it" (vs. 14). Compared with God and his lasting works, our lives and supposed contributions are not worth mentioning. There's no valid reason to be impressed with the accomplishments of any human being (including Solomon), but "all should stand in awe before" God (vs. 14).

If a seemingly bright passage like 3:1-8 turns out to somewhat dismal, once seen in context, that may help us understand the tone and intention of other parts of the book, which look strange at first reading.

Cynical Wisdom

Ecclesiastes is not an easy book, but its main point is clear enough: life is futile unless lived for God. It should be thought of more as a book of questions than as a book of answers. The kind of wisdom found here is what some have called "cynical wisdom" (Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Zondervan, 1993, p. 212). "Cynical" may be a surprising word to hear in connection with material in the Bible, but it is a very apt description of the perspective of most of Ecclesiastes.

Cynical wisdom is the kind of wisdom gained by bitter experience, disappointment, by being disillusioned and seeing the "vanity" of false hopes, temporary delights, and superficial values. Most of the book is unrelentingly cynical until you come to the very end. You need to know how the book concludes in order to grasp the overall message and in order not to misunderstand such strange verses as the following:

7:3 "Sorrow is better than laughter,
for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad."

7:14 "In the day of prosperity be joyful,
and in the day of adversity consider;
God has made the one as well as the other,
so that mortals may not find out anything that will come after them."

7:16 "Do not be too righteous,
and do not act too wise;
why should you destroy yourself?"

8:14 "There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous."

9:2 ". . . the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath."

9:4-5 "But whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is

better than a dead lion. The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost."

10:19 "A feast is made for laughter,
and wine makes life merry,
but money is the answer for everything." (NIV)
["money meets every need" (NRSV)]

If you were to take one of these verses as the final word on its topic, a very wrong impression would result. The final answer, rather, is Ecc. 12:13: "Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of everyone." After all the superficial answers have been tried and found wanting, the book ends on this simple note and with the reminder that we will answer to God for our lives. The strange verses quoted above, when *viewed in the context of the whole Book of Ecclesiastes*, can be properly understood as the insights of someone who has truly seen the futility of life when not lived with the confident expectation of God's eternity to fulfill our longings.

When Solomon looked ahead to the end of the road, he saw accountability, judgment. He did not see--at least he does not say that he sees--a glorious future when lasting fulfillment will be realized. If all we have to look forward to is what Solomon could see, then some of the above statements could simply be taken at face value (7:14; 8:14; 9:2). In fact, those statements could well be taken to show us why we need eternity to balance the scales left unbalanced by time.

Even with such an understanding, some of the statements in Ecclesiastes can only be understood as ironic or sarcastic in tone (7:16; 10:19). Other statements are simply full of despair (7:3; 9:4-5). The comparison between a dead lion and a living dog (9:4-5; remember that dogs were unclean, despicable animals to Solomon) can only make sense coming from someone who sees despair as inescapable because he has no hope for joy other than what this present life can give. The point of the comparison, of course, is not about animals. Rather, Solomon is saying that the most despised of living people are better off than the most respected and revered of those who have already died.

If we really believed that it's better to be alive and despised than to be dead and revered, where would we get our heroes? Who would defend the country? Who would pin on a badge to fight crime and protect the community? Somehow even our common sense tells us that we cannot follow Solomon's despair to its logical conclusion and stay there, unless we are willing to give up all hope, all affections, all honor, and all transcendent values. Solomon himself could not stop there; when he makes this statement he is in the process of exploring the possibilities, trying to find the meaning in life, trying to find the value that can give him true purpose.

You will notice that even the living are not given that much to rejoice over, except by way of comparison with the dead. "The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing" (9:5). Well, at least the living know something: they know they will die! Of course, Solomon is not reflecting the whole of

Scripture's teaching on the question of what the dead know (see Luke 16:23; Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:8; Matt. 22:32). He is reflecting what we can know if our only way to be sure is by our present experience as mortals: we know that human beings die; we don't know what, if anything, dead human beings know. It is helpful to remember that Solomon is writing 900 years before the resurrection of Jesus, and at least two centuries before the revelation of bodily resurrection which is first mentioned in the OT in the prophecies of Isaiah (25:8; 26:19) and later made more explicit by Daniel (12:2).

What Counts in the End? (11:7-12:14)

We have previously characterized the Book of Ecclesiastes with the following words:

> Ecclesiastes tells us that life will end
> no matter what we do.

If "life" for us means only the kind of life we have now, "mortal" life, then truly it will end, no matter what we do. If we adopt that viewpoint by itself, we will be left in utter hopelessness; we will lack any motivation or purpose other than momentary pleasures. Certainly there would be no reason to make painful or uncomfortable sacrifices for the benefit of others. But of course this viewpoint does not reflect all of Scripture. We know from the New Testament especially, but even from some parts of the Old Testament (such as Psalms 16, 17, 73; Isaiah 25, 26; Daniel 12), that there is hope beyond physical death.

Even in the Book of Ecclesiastes, with its relentlessly negative evaluation of things in this life, there is clearly the expectation that there will be more after this life--at least the facing of God who gave us life and who will call us to account for what we have done with this life. In this respect, Ecclesiastes is in agreement with the rest of Scripture: we are accountable for our actions; we will have to answer to God (see 2 Cor. 5:10). Through the entire Book of Ecclesiastes, with all its cynical wisdom and dismal commentary on the futility of human activities, Solomon has been driving toward this unescapable conclusion. Whether or not we *have the answers* to the meaning of life (and Solomon still has his questions, despite his great wisdom), we will have to *give an answer* to God for how we have lived. With or without answers, we will have to give an answer--perhaps that's the crowning irony of Ecclesiastes.

11:7-12:8

It's difficult to say just where the conclusion of the book begins, but a convenient place to pick up is with 11:7-9, where Solomon speaks to the old and then to the young. Life is a good gift, and those who "live many years should rejoice in them all," but they should also soberly remember that "the days of darkness will be many" (vs. 8). That could be taken in two ways. "The days of darkness" could be the difficult times during this life. That's certainly true; the longer we live the more likely we are to see more days of difficulty and pain (of all kinds). Without excluding that meaning, we should probably understand

Solomon to be referring to "the days of darkness" after this life is over. No matter how long the life lived here, the time afterward will be far longer. Solomon is saying that a long earthly life, for which we should be grateful, is nevertheless overshadowed by the coming days of darkness.

To the young (vs. 9) Solomon gives encouragement to enjoy life, enjoy the vigor of youth, and "follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes" (like we might say, "follow your dreams" or "go for it!"). But this is not license to act irresponsibly, since he immediately adds this admonition: "for all these things God will bring you into judgment." He adds an encouragement for the young not to worry about anxiety and pain (vs. 10), but it turns into another example of irony (or sarcasm), as he once again sings his refrain: "Youth and the dawn of life are vanity." So typical of this book, Solomon pumps you up and then bursts your bubble!

The fairly well known passage which follows (12:1-7) is actually a continuation of Solomon's admonition to the young (in other words, the chapter division was put in a bad place, many centuries later). Verse one is perhaps the best known verse from the book other than the refrain "Vanity, vanity." The point of the verse is to encourage the young and vigorous to acknowledge and honor God, our Creator, during that time of life when we are most tempted to consider ourselves immortal and self-sufficient. In effect Solomon says, Go ahead and adjust your thinking now to this reality: no matter how young and strong you are now, it cannot last. To accept this reality eventually is inevitable; to resist acknowledging it is to invite eventual bitterness of soul.

The rest of verse one and verses 2-7 contain a vivid and astonishing description, in figurative language, of what the young have to look forward to. The time will come when life will not be so full of pleasure as it is now for the young (vs. 1). The bright skies of the present (figuratively speaking) will eventually cloud up and rain (vs. 2; compare 11:7). Trouble will surely come, if it hasn't already.

The language of verses 3-6 has been variously interpreted. Some see here an allegorical description of the wearing down and eventual failure of various parts of our physical being. "The grinders" (vs. 3, NIV) can easily be thought of as our teeth, and "the windows" might make us think of the eyes which grow dim with age. The "almond tree blossoms" (vs. 5) is a fairly obvious reference to the change in hair color brought on by age. Even "the silver cord" and "the golden bowl" (vs. 6) have been interpreted as rather morbid references to the spinal cord and the skull.

Whenever picture language is used, we need to be careful about pressing the details. There is a great deal of disagreement in the various commentaries about the significance of these figurative expressions, and the arguments are old, going all the way back to the times of Jesus and even earlier. The rabbis and scribes even of that day could not agree on the precise meaning of each of these items in 12:3-6. I think the best approach is to take the clear metaphors for what they seem to indicate (such as "almond blossoms" standing for white hair), but not to insist on a specific correspondence between each item and some part of the human body.

It seems very unlikely to me, for example, that the writer was thinking about the spinal cord when he mentioned a "silver cord." Far more likely he was thinking of a lamp (i.e., a bowl holding oil) suspended by a cord. If the cord is broken, the bowl (lamp) falls and the light goes out. That makes a vivid picture of the ending of this life. The details of the *silver* cord and *golden* bowl serve to emphasize that these are valuable, precious items which can perish in this way. In the same way, that which sustains the precious human life can be broken, shattered, and "the light goes out."

There is one very useful advantage in taking this kind of simpler approach to the picture language of vss. 3-6 (instead of trying to find some allegorical significance in every detail): A simpler approach keeps us from getting bogged down by arguments over minute details and keeps the overall picture before our eyes. What, in fact, is being presented to us in vss. 3-6? The overall picture is one of decline and disintegration. Just a few comments will be offered here on certain details other than the ones dealt with already; the most important thing is the overall impression.

Verse 3: Guards should be strong and courageous, but eventually they will tremble. Strong men will be bent with age and weakness. What's the picture? Decline.

Verse 4: Closed doors and slowing activity on the way to cessation. Declining enjoyment of things that once gave pleasure (singing birds, for example), on the way to eventual silence.

Verse 5: Increased nervousness and fear of things which once caused no alarm. A dragging "grasshopper" is almost a contradiction in terms. The bounding insect reduced to dragging itself along is clearly dying. This is a picture of a person, once energetic but now struggling to get around.

Verse 6: A broken pitcher at the fountain. All you have to do is imagine it, and you can tell the story yourself. A vessel left useless at the very place where once it served so well. "Wheel" could be a mistranslation; some suggest it should be "vessel." Either way, the important thing is that it is "broken" and abandoned, no longer usable.

When we come to verse seven, the words are more literal or at least more usual in our understanding of them. This verse, of course, reflects the understanding of humanity's creation which we find in Genesis 2:7--"the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (or "living soul"). What God put together in the beginning, in the first human being, is separated at death. The breath of life, the spirit, departs from the body (see James 2:26). Now dead, the body decays and returns into the physical elements from which it originally came. Disintegration and decay--that's the picture of vss. 3-7, and it leads to the familiar refrain: "Vanity of vanities, . . . all is vanity."

12:9-14

Verses 9-10 contain an allusion to the Book of Proverbs. Verses 11-12 contain a more interesting commentary on the nature of books and what they can

and cannot do. "The Teacher" of Ecclesiastes had written "many proverbs" and other words of truth. He wanted his own words to be "like goads" which would prompt reflection and understanding. Wise sayings are also "like nails" which hold things in place. So wise teachings, proverbs, have value in more than one respect. It is good to know these things, good to write them down, good to read them and think about them. But Solomon warns against the false notion that more of a good thing will necessarily be good for us.

Just like every other good thing which Solomon had experienced, so with his words of wisdom--more and more won't bring lasting satisfaction (remember 2:17-18). The attempt to produce more and more, to explain more and more, to read more and more, will be endless, because there is no place to stop and say "enough." The human soul and human society want more and more, but there's no satisfaction, no "enough," and ultimately that leaves the soul and the society empty, depressed, and ready to despair.

Solomon is not saying that we should not write or read more books. Quite the contrary, he has commended wise words as "like goads" and "like nails." He is warning us, however, not to expect to be satisfied ultimately by our learning. He is warning us that we will eventually wear ourselves out with this activity, just as we do with all human activities. Solomon doesn't say, "Don't do the good things"; he says, "Don't expect too much from the good things. If you do, you're going to be disappointed."

In a sense, he is saying that we'll never get all the answers, no matter how many books we write or read. But we will have to give an answer to God, for "the bottom line" for time and eternity is that we will stand before God to give an account for our lives. That is the note with which Solomon concludes this sober and sobering book, in 12:13-14. The "bottom line" quite literally of this book is that we should "fear God, and keep his commandments," for that is our duty as creatures (compare 12:1), and because "God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil."

Beyond the Bottom Line: Further Reflections

The fear of God was the most basic theme of Proverbs (Prov. 1:7), and it is the final message of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes ends with the expectation of judgment and the exhortation to fear God and obey him in view of that certain judgment. There is, then, an expectation of something beyond the end of mortal life. There is an expectation of judgment, of accountability, but nothing clear about rewards or restoration or ultimate fulfillment. Solomon looks to God as the one who has provided good things to enjoy in this life. He soberly looks to God as his judge when this life is over. *What he does not seem able to do is to look to God as his hope.* That does not mean that Ecclesiastes is not a good book for us to read and honor as God's Word. It does mean that we need to appreciate what the purpose of Ecclesiastes is (and isn't).

The Book of Ecclesiastes does not serve the purpose of giving us a positive hope for the future. Rather it serves the purpose of stripping us of false hopes, stripping us of the common human illusion that temporal hopes are sufficient for us. The very fact that our heart longs for more than this life can

give--more fulfillment, more joy, more love, more peace, more time, more knowledge--this very longing is a testimony to the fact that we were made for more. But Ecclesiastes does not spell out what that "more" will be. Rather, it looks at all that can be experienced here and says "not enough."

With its focus on the inadequacy of things in this life to satisfy, the Book of Ecclesiastes stands as a great contradiction to the spirit of our age, especially in the increasing affluence of most people and the ever-increasing availability of "toys" and distractions which consume more and more of our time. Never before in human history have so many people been able to afford to spend so much time in leisure pursuits. A very evident gauge of our relative affluence as a society is the amount of money spent on leisure activities. The salaries paid in mind-boggling sums to fairly average professional athletes is just a small part of this. Again, leisure activities in themselves can be good for us, but are we looking to them to make our lives good in ways that count for eternity?

It is not through Ecclesiastes but through the Gospel of Jesus Christ that we can have the expectation of resurrection, the complete renewal and fulfillment of this body we now have. That expectation reflects back on this present life and gives us the meaning and purpose for which Solomon was looking. When he looked ahead, he saw judgment (accountability). So should we. We should, however, rejoice in the fact that we can see more about the future than he did. Seeing Jesus' resurrection as a forecast of our own, and possessing within our very beings the pledge of the Holy Spirit to complete God's work of redemption by giving us new bodies (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:4-5; Eph. 1:13-14), we have the firmest of foundations for our hope and for our faith that our lives today are not "vanity of vanities" but are instead being transformed from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18).

Because of the Gospel, because of Jesus' death and resurrection, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the promised return of Christ and our own resurrection, we can face the future and the present with a different attitude than Solomon's. We can face the same judgment of which he warned us and have confidence about the outcome for ourselves (see 1 John 2:28; 3:2-3; 4:17).

In view of Jesus' cross and resurrection, and by the indwelling Spirit of God, we can and should see our lives from a different point of view than Solomon did. So why do we still need Ecclesiastes? So that we will know how much we need Jesus, and how much we should appreciate the perspective on life's meaning which has been given to us in Jesus Christ. Do we need such a reminder, such a lesson? Yes, because we are tempted constantly to seek our fulfillment, our meaning and satisfaction, in the same activities which Solomon found so unfulfilling, the same activities which consume the attention of most people in the world most of the time.

The world (and I include us in that word) would be better off if everyone had the same conviction about the judgment of God coming at the end of mortal life. There would certainly be less lawlessness if people really believed, as Solomon did, that God was going to hold everyone accountable. The world, our nation, our city would be better off if everyone believed that, but it would not be

better enough. It will only be better enough when people believe not only in judgment but also in redemption, in resurrection, in the power of the blood of Jesus and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Ecclesiastes can get us ready for the Gospel, but we need the Gospel and the power of God to bring the changes for which Ecclesiastes should make us hungry and thirsty.

Questions from LessonMaker software, by NavPress
Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 - A Time for Everything

OPEN IT
1. For what other reasons than to make a living do people work?

EXPLORE IT
2. What topics did Solomon explore in these verses? (3:1-22)

3. What has God set in the hearts of people? (3:11)

4. What's the best way we can spend our days while alive? (3:12)

5. What will God call into account? (3:15)

GET IT
6. What did Solomon mean by his statement that "there is a time for everything"?

7. How is the fact that God has placed eternity in our heart manifested in our society?

8. How do people in our society wrongly seek to fill their longing for God?

APPLY IT
9. What is one way you can enjoy your work or what God has given you?

10. Who can help you remember your accountability to God? How?

Questions from LessonMaker software, by NavPress
Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:14 - The Conclusion of the Matter

OPEN IT
1. What is the worst thing to you about getting old?

2. What motivates you to keep God's commands?

EXPLORE IT
3. What advice did Solomon have for the young? (11:9)

4. When should we take pains to remember our Creator? (12:1)

5. How did Solomon conclude this book? (12:9-14)

6. What did Solomon say about books and study? (12:12)

7. What is a person's whole duty? (12:13)

GET IT
8. Why is it important to establish a relationship with God when we are young?

9. In what way is it easy to forget our Creator?

10. What can we do to keep our accountability to God in mind?

11. How should we live our life in light of the reality of death?

12. With what mood would you say Solomon concluded this book?

13. What is the relationship between fearing God and keeping his commandments?

14. How does the fact that God is going to judge every deed motivate you?

APPLY IT
15. What is something you can do this week to remind yourself of God's place in your life?

16. Whether young or old what is something you will do today to enjoy the life God has given you?

Lesson 6
Job: Wisdom Through Suffering

Historical Background and Authorship

There is no certainty at all about the historical setting or authorship of Job. Internal indications (things mentioned and not mentioned) could place Job in approximately the time of Abraham (around 2000 B.C.). You will, for example, find no references in the book to Israel's history or to the Law of God as given to Moses. A large number of archaic words, many found only in the Book of Job and nowhere else in the OT, would also point to very ancient times. It is often pointed out, however, that such evidence would only indicate an ancient story, and not necessarily that the book itself was written so long ago. The story of Job could be many centuries older than the written form it has in the book (just as the story of Abraham was put into its written form many centuries after Abraham). The actual time of composition for Job continues to be a matter of speculation. Some scholars date it as late as 400 B.C.; others date it much earlier, from the time of Solomon. Strictly speaking, nothing rules out an even earlier date.

Likewise the location of Job's experience is unclear. The mention of "Uz" has not helped, for it has not been located. It could have been in Syria, south of Damascus, or it could have been much further south, toward Arabia.

With unanswered questions about date and place, we obviously cannot say much about authorship. One thing, however, needs to be said about the perspective of the author. The author does not write from the perspective of Job. He writes about Job's experience. He does not write as Job. That does not prove that Job is not the author, although that seems very unlikely. Recognition of the author's perspective is important for how we read and hear the words of Job and also the words of the others who speak in this book dominated by dialogue.

Whoever the author was, that person provides in the "prologue" (1:1-2:13) some information about Job's experience which Job does not have during the events and conversations reported by the author. You as the reader know about Satan's attack against Job's property, family, and finally his health. Job's comments and questions (and those of his friends) do not reflect knowledge of the satanic origin of these disasters, nor of the dialogue between God and Satan reported in chapters 1-2. It is important for our understanding of the book that we remember that Job did not have a copy of the Book of Job to read! His struggle to interpret what has happened to him is made greater by the absence of information that you and I have as readers. The unknown author also had that information or perspective, but the author portrays Job and his friends as not having it. As readers, we know that Job's friends are incorrect in their assessment of his troubles. If we remember that they too did not have the Book of Job to read, we may be a bit more sympathetic to them in their attempts to help Job. We should assume that they did not want to make him feel worse; they wanted to help him but their theology was inadequate to the task.

It would help also to realize that the purpose of the Book of Job is not primarily to teach us about Satan's strategy to destroy or discourage us, although we can certainly learn some things about that from chs. 1-2. Anything we learn here about the aim and

motive of the adversary, however, is incidental to the major purpose of the book, which is to focus on the human struggle to understand and cope with situations for which we do not have all the facts. The resolution at the end of the book does not involve a revelation to Job of what really caused all the problems. Rather it involves a greater revelation to Job of God himself.

Introduction to Job as Wisdom Literature

With Job we come to the longest and, in some ways, the most difficult of the three Wisdom books in this study. Difficulties include questions about authorship, time of writing, etc. The greatest difficulty of the book, however, is its subject matter. Although Ecclesiastes is challenging material because it forces us to face uncomfortable questions about the significance and worth of many things in which we make great investments, the Book of Job asks even more uncomfortable questions: What is the meaning of human suffering, especially the suffering endured by righteous people? What does suffering do to our perspective and motivation for serving God? Would we respond as Job did?

In one way, Job is more of a book of questions than Ecclesiastes. The author of Ecclesiastes asked his questions in the kind of reflective mode which is possible only for an educated person with at least some freedom from work--with time to think and ask questions. The Book of Job contains questions asked in the midst of inescapable and seemingly unexplainable pain--the kind of questions which might come to mind from anyone thus cornered by suffering (although Job is written in fine literary style as poetry). Also Job's friends ask questions about the meaning of Job's experience and raise questions about Job's righteousness. After all the questions asked by Job and his friends, God starts asking his questions--questions which Job cannot answer (chs. 38-41). Ironically, Job's questions get no answers except for God's questions which Job can't answer!

Once more let me remind you of the (somewhat simplistic) comparison made earlier of the three books being studied in this series:

Proverbs tells us that life can be good
if we do the right thing (i.e., the wise thing).

Ecclesiastes tells us that life will end
no matter what we do.

Job tells us that life can be painful
even if we do the right thing.

The point has already been made that Proverbs does not provide guarantees that life will go smoothly and painlessly; rather it provides guidance for how we should conduct ourselves if we want life to turn out well. Indeed, Job himself could be pointed to as an ideal example of someone who lived by the precepts of Proverbs; his experience illustrates the fact that Proverbs does not provide "recipe knowledge" but rather instruction in the fear of God. Job continued to live by the main precept of Proverbs--he feared God--even when he did not experience "success" by mortal standards, even when

he was vexed and confused by what had happened and by what people were saying to him.

Job deals with the question of "theodicy," not in abstraction but in a concrete example--the life of Job. Theodicy is the term used to refer to the ancient and modern problem of the existence of pain and other evils, especially as the existence of evil creates a problem for believing in both the omnipotence and the goodness of God. If God is all-powerful, he could prevent "bad things happening to good people"; why does he not do so? If he could but does not prevent or deliver from pain and suffering, is it because he does not really care? This is an old philosophical problem for belief in the existence of all-powerful and benevolent God, but more importantly it is a religious question which many people have asked out of their own pain--"Why has God let this happen (or done this) to me?" Since this is a question which people often have reason to ask, we should be grateful for the book in the Bible which most clearly raises this issue.

Wisdom for Reading the Book of Job

Probably the best preparation for reading Job with understanding is to have experience with suffering and unanswered questions. We would not wish too much preparation of that nature on ourselves or on others. Besides the wisdom which comes from life itself, there are, however, some points of advice for reading the Book of Job which can be helpful for any of us, regardless of our experience or lack thereof.

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart point out that the Book of Job contains a lot of "wrong advice"! (See How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, Zondervan, 1993, p. 215.) They are referring to the numerous pieces of advice given to Job by his visiting friends. This points to one of the most important pieces of advice that needs to be heeded by readers of Job: Pay attention to who the speaker is in every context. If Bildad the Shuhite is telling Job what he thinks, that is not necessarily God's view of things! Several speakers exchange viewpoints and commentary throughout chapters 3-37. Some of the speeches (especially Job's) go on for more than a chapter, which means you may have to keep looking back until you find the speaker identified. (Example: Elihu is the speaker for 32:6-37:24).

Job's Situation (Chapters 1-3)

When and where Job lived, as mentioned earlier, we do not know. What is most important about him, especially for reading this book, we do know: he was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (1:1, also 1:8; 2:3). His steadfastness in fearing God and shunning evil is tested severely in this book, and his motivation in fearing God is called into question very early in the account.

In a book containing many profound questions, asked by several different persons, perhaps the most interesting question comes from God's and Job's adversary, Satan! Some students of the Book of Job regard this question as the most important one for understanding why the book was written: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9). In other words, does Job worship and serve God only because he thinks it will be to his advantage? When all the supposed advantages and benefits are removed, will Job still fear God?

Satan's challenge to God, that Job will curse God rather than fear him if his blessings are taken (1:9-11) is answered by Job's words in 1:21: "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." This is Job's response after losing virtually all his property, servants, and family (1:13-19). This series of disasters is presented as having happened all at once, as messengers repeatedly bring him bad news while another finishes his report. Anyone would be reeling from just one of these blows. Job, appropriately for his culture, expresses his mourning by tearing his robe and shaving his head (1:20). He expresses his continuing trust in God by worship and blessing the name of the Lord who had blessed him (1:21). He does not curse God for taking away a blessing previously given. Job no longer has those blessings, but he still recognizes them as God's blessings, not as Job's entitlements.

Satan is not done with Job, nor with his opposition to God. He issues the challenge again, this time ascribing his own self-centered motivation to Job: "Skin for skin! . . . A man will give all he has for his own life. But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face" (2:4-5; NIV). Granted God's permission to test Job still further by attacking his physical being, Satan "inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (2:7). Notice that the sovereignty of God over Satan is affirmed by these first two chapters (cf. 1:10, 12; 2:6). Clearly Satan is identified as the immediate cause of the evils which befell Job, but the Book of Job never shrinks from acknowledging Almighty God as the one who allows Satan's activity, although Satan is the "adversary" in rebellion against God's good purposes.

Job's wife, out of her own anguish and anger, unwittingly encourages Job to fulfill Satan's prediction and purpose: "Curse God, and die" (2:9). Job rejects her counsel as foolish and asks her, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" (2:10).

Job seems again to have passed the test; he has not done what Satan predicted he would. But the contest is just in its earliest stages: Job has suffered sudden and complete loss of his wealth and his family, but now he has to live with the empty reality and his questions. The fight has just begun. The dialogues which dominate almost the entirety of this long book are the real heart of the conflict. And this is how it often is with us, isn't it? The conflict is not simply a matter of what has or has not happened; the conflict is over how to respond to what has happened. What will we say and do now? How do we go on in faithfulness when the blessings and security are gone?

Satan's view is that Job (and all humanity) will do only what is in his own selfish interests, to secure his own safety and well-being. That's what is really being tested in the experience of Job, although we would also have to say that Job's understanding of God and his friends' "theology" are also being tested and debated. Many questions are raised in this profound book. But with Job's unanswered questions and God's unanswerable questions, we should compare the fact that Satan's question is answered by the Book of Job as a whole: Job continued to fear God, even while his questions went unanswered and his suffering unrelieved. Not having all the wisdom he could have used, Job persisted in the wisdom which is the beginning and chief part of wisdom (Prov. 1:7; 9:10): he continued to fear God.

This is one of the lessons of the Book of Job: It is right to fear God regardless of the possible benefits to us or the lack thereof. Job, with all his questions, is the example

of continuing to fear God even while his questions go without answer. And when God speaks to him, asking him questions which Job cannot answer, Job's reverence only grows more profound (42:2-6). The fear of God in which Job begins, continues, and grows is the unifying focus of the three biblical books studied in this series. Proverbs said it at the beginning; Ecclesiastes said it at the end; Job says it throughout, as the message of its whole drama: The fear of God is the chief part of wisdom.

Job continues to fear God; he refuses to curse God, die, and get out of his misery. But Job is not an emotionless robot--he hurts deeply, and this comes out in the speech which opens the long dialogue part of the book. All of chapter three is given over to the venting of Job's great sorrow. He does not curse God, but he does curse the day of his birth and describes himself as inconsolable. His fear of God prevents his cursing God, but his life now holds for him no apparent good. This profound lament becomes, as it were, the invitation for his friends to offer their analysis and prescriptions for his situation. The dialogue will continue among them all the way through chapter 37 (and we'll look at some of this in the next lesson).

Disastrous Effects without Understandable Causes

From the beginning of the book, the reader has a distinct advantage over Job. We have been allowed to overhear a dialogue between God and Satan. That dialogue sets the stage for the drama to follow. Job, however, as the central character who is undergoing the tragedies and sufferings, was not given the information which the reader received. Job has to try to understand what is happening to him without the benefit of realizing that he is serving as something of a "test case" in a dispute between God and Satan. Another way of saying this is that Job is having to deal with effects without knowing the causes (a disadvantage which everyone experiences from time to time!). Job's so-called "comforters" likewise are trying to analyze Job's situation based only on what they can observe and what they already believed about the causes of suffering. They attempt to identify the supposed cause of the evil effects they can see in Job's life--there must be an evil cause in Job for the evil effects Job is experiencing. As is often the case with human beings, they do not know that they do not know enough to make a judgment.

The dialogue between God and Satan at the beginning of Job is unheard by Job, his wife, or Job's friends. The reader's perspective, in comparison, is "privileged." This privileged position might be compared with the perspective of a reader of a novel or of a historical account. Often the reader of a story (fictional or otherwise) "knows" more than the characters in a story, perhaps because the narrator has given more information than was available to the characters or because the reader already knows how the story ends. In the book of Job, the reader knows more than Job about why Job is suffering, and this fact serves to communicate an important truth: There is more to human existence than can be observed by our human senses; therefore, some things we need to know (or would like to know) cannot be known except by revelation. Job wonders why these calamities have come upon him; his friends have their suggested explanations; but none of them knows the truth of the situation.

We could think of this as a contrast between the visible realities (which Job and the other characters can see, hear, feel, etc.) and the invisible or spiritual realities. In other words, the invisible spiritual reality of Satan (the adversary of God and God's purposes) is the cause behind the evil suffered by Job in the physical world. While this

would be true in light of all Scripture, and would especially fit the first two chapters of Job, it is in the final analysis not the most important theme in the book. It is not even the revelatory answer given to Job by God at the end of the book! The book ends without a word of explanation (or apology) to Job for the horrendous trial he has gone through.

Another point should be made here because of a modern misunderstanding of the Book of Job. Job did not suffer all the things described in this book because he feared them or because of a lack of faith. Some teachers have tried to explain Job's sufferings in this way, apparently because such an explanation suits their theology. Some have pointed to the statement made by Job in 3:25--"What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me" (NIV)--as the reason why the catastrophes had happened to Job. That is to fasten on one sentence and--by taking it out of context--to use it to explain away the message of the entire book. (Also, note that this was Job speaking, not God speaking to Job. Nor does God give this as an explanation in the latter part of the book.)

The Book of Job as a whole makes it quite clear that Job did not do anything to cause these bad things to happen to him; neither did they happen because of something he did not do. The profound impact of the book of Job is due precisely to the fact that the disasters to Job's family, possessions, and finally his health were not his doing--Job is buffeted by circumstances not of his making and not under his control. It is a distortion of the worst kind to replace the profound, God-centered message of this book with a simplistic, man-centered theory which puts humans in control of the universe by their beliefs, statements, or attitudes.

Human beliefs, words, and attitudes are important, and they do make a difference in the world, but that is simply not the message of Job. The message of the Book of Job, to the contrary, is that there are some things for which we do not have explanations (at least not at present) and over which we do not have control. The message of the book of Job, in fact, is a distinct and clear contradiction of any theology which would blame human lack of faith for every problem, pain, or difficulty.

Job's outburst in 3:25 should be compared also with what Job later says in 30:26--"Yet when I hoped for good, evil came; when I looked for light, then came darkness" (NIV). (We might imagine that someone with a distorted image of God as the cosmic "spoil-sport" could fasten on this verse as the explanation of Job's misery!) In 3:25 Job seems to be saying that he had been worried (at least on occasion) that something like this might happen, but in 30:26 he claims to have been expecting good things instead of what he did get. What did Job get? Did he get what he was afraid he would get (3:25) or what he did not expect to get (30:26)? The fact is, we cannot use either of these two passages to explain what happened to Job.

These statements were not put into the book to explain what had happened, but rather to tell us how Job was responding to his experience. Both verses are the language of feeling rather than statements of simple facts of cause and effect. One statement is like what we might cry in response to bad news: "Oh, no, I was afraid that would happen!" The other is like what we might say as an expression of shock or bitter disappointment: "How could this happen? I was so sure it was going to turn out otherwise!" In neither case would we be explaining why the bad thing had happened; we would be expressing our reaction to it. And anyone who has had a bitter disappointment or disaster which took weeks, months, or even years to recover from would have no trouble believing that

one individual could have (perhaps on different days) both kinds of reactions (3:25 and 30:26).

Questions from LessonMaker software, by NavPress

Job 1-3
OPEN IT
1. Why do you think bad things happen to people?

EXPLORE IT
2. Whom did Job fear, and what did Job shun? (1:1)

3. What did Satan say Job would do if God took away everything Job had? (1:11)

4. How did Job respond to the tragedies that happened to him? (1:20-21)

5. Why did Satan say that it was no big deal that Job had maintained his integrity? (2:4-5)

6. What did Job say about the day of his birth? (3:2-10)

GET IT
7. If you had been in Job's situation, how do you think you would have responded?

8. For what type of events do people blame God?

9. Why is it easy to accept good from God but not trouble?

10. How would sitting in silence with a friend be helpful?

APPLY IT
11. What is one way you can fear God and shun evil today?

12. About what disappointment in your life do you want to be honest with God today?

Lesson 7
Job: Questions and Complaints

In the previous lesson we looked at the disasters which fell on Job and how he responded. He did not curse God, but he did curse the day of his birth. Once Job begins to speak, it opens the door for his friends--Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar--to offer their opinions on why these horrible things have happened and how Job might be able to improve the situation. After each one speaks, Job offers his rebuttal and further complaint. Much later in the book, yet another person--Elihu--is provoked by Job's words into speaking his mind (chs. 32-37). Since the dialogue among Job and these four other men occupies the vast majority of this book, we will be able only to sample what is said. I trust that will be enough to get an adequate sense of the prevailing tone throughout most of the book.

It was also mentioned in the previous lesson that the Book of Job contains a lot of "wrong advice." Actually the "wrong advice" given might have been good advice in general or if it had been given in another context. The inappropriateness of the advice is largely due to the context in which it was given. You could call it good advice in the wrong context--which makes the advice wrong. Although they waited patiently for a week before speaking, Job's friends were full of advice based on their diagnosis of his situation. Because their diagnosis is faulty, their prescriptions are. [The apocryphal wisdom book of Ecclesiasticus advises us that "A wise sentence should be rejected when it comes out of a fool's mouth; for he will not speak it in due season" (20:20). (See also Prov. 25:11; 26:4-5).]

Ironically the "bad advice" of these friends could have easily come from a superficial reading of the book of Proverbs. For example, read Job 11:13-20.

13If you direct your heart rightly,
you will stretch out your hands toward him.
14If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away,
and do not let wickedness reside in your tents.
15Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish;
you will be secure, and will not fear.
16You will forget your misery;
you will remember it as waters that have passed away.
17And your life will be brighter than the noonday;
its darkness will be like the morning.
18And you will have confidence, because there is hope;
you will be protected and take your rest in safety.
19You will lie down, and no one will make you afraid;
many will entreat your favor.
20But the eyes of the wicked will fail;
all way of escape will be lost to them,
and their hope is to breathe their last.

In summary, these words assert that the wicked suffer like this, but not the righteous. But who is saying this? Is this God's explanation of Job's sufferings? Is this Job's admission of guilt? No, this is Zophar's recommendation for the way out of Job's trials. It would, perhaps, be better advice for someone other than Job, perhaps for someone in trouble of his own making. When one reads this in the context of the whole book of Job (especially in light of 1:1-2:10, and 38:1-42:17) it sounds at least inadequate and inappropriate, if not downright cruel. It was certainly not a word likely to bring encouragement and healing to Job, regardless of Zophar's intentions, which we may assume to have been good.

But compare Zophar's superficial and out-of-place advice with Proverbs 12:21--"No harm happens to the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble." If Prov. 12:21 is all that you know about suffering, what else could be the conclusion about Job's situation? You would have to conclude, as apparently Zophar had, that Job was being chastised for some wickedness and that, if he would repent, he would once again know the blessing of God.

One of the chief benefits of familiarity with the book of Job is the added perspective it gives us for the reading of Proverbs. It becomes clear that individual proverbs cannot be invoked as formulas or incantations which assure certain results. As emphasized in the section on Proverbs, the individual proverbs should be read more as instruction than as promises (or "recipes" for success). The wisdom of Proverbs certainly shows us how to order our lives if we desire to see good results rather than evil, but the book as a whole and the individual proverbs have to be read in the context of the whole Bible, and that context includes Job! [See also Psalm 73, which also raises questions about the prosperity of the wicked in comparison with the struggles of the righteous.]

This caution about how to read and invoke the Proverbs also reflects back on the speeches found in the Book of Job. Consider again the words of Zophar in Job 11:13:20. Would this be good advice in general? I think we could say, "Yes" to that question. We would all certainly be better off if we sought to put iniquity far from us (vs. 14); ultimately it will be true that "the eyes of the wicked will fail [i.e., their desires will fail]; all way of escape will be lost to them" (vs. 20). The general effect of Zophar's counsel would be to seek diligently to live godly lives. The problem with his words is that they are not the depth of wisdom needed to deal with Job's situation.

We might ask, "What should Zophar have said?" Maybe he should have just told Job that he was there to be his friend, that he did not know why some things happen, but that he was still sure of God's goodness and faithfulness. You can, after all, remain sure of God's goodness without having to make a bad guy out of Job! But we humans don't like to be lacking answers, especially if we think we know a thing or two about God and righteousness. Another thing we especially find uncomfortable is not being able to explain why someone else is suffering undeserved pain and loss. Our inability to explain makes us nervous about our own security.

For example, if you hear about someone becoming the victim of seemingly random violent crime, one of the first things you do (perhaps subconsciously) is assess the possibilities of the same thing happening to you. If the crime happened in a different part of town, or in place where you seldom or never go, you feel much less threatened than if it happened next door or in some place and circumstance where you frequently are found. If we see someone become a victim whose circumstances are too much like our

very own, we find it hard to deny that it could happen to us! We lose some of our sense of security; the world becomes for us a more dangerous place because we have lost some of our control over what might happen to us.

That is one of the functions of having a "theology," a more or less coherent set of beliefs about God and God's relationship to us. We trust our theology to provide a sense of security about our own lives, our future, and the contingencies of our mortality. This is not bad, in itself. But Job's experience--and sometimes our own--compels us to ask whether our security is well founded or an illusion, whether things really are this way or whether we believe it because we want to or need to, for the sake of our security. What this means is that, in the dialogues in which Job's friends accuse him or plead with him to accept their position that he has done something to bring these troubles on himself, you will hear more than one person defending himself. Clearly Job defends himself, but his friends are defending their own security by questioning and accusing him. After all, if this could happen to the kind of man they thought Job was, what might happen to them? If they can explain it (by asserting that surely Job must have done something to deserve it), they can feel more secure that it won't happen to them as long as they "keep the rules."

Eliphaz the Temanite (4:1-5:27)

The first to speak after Job's mournful outburst (ch. 3) is Eliphaz the Temanite. Eliphaz notes that Job's "fear of God" and "the integrity" of his own ways have been the basis for his confidence in times past (4:6). What Eliphaz says next, however, expresses doubt that Job's integrity has been all that it was reported to be. By his question--"Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?" (vs. 7)--Eliphaz implies that Job must surely not be innocent. His "theology of suffering" (i.e., how Eliphaz would explain why people suffer) becomes completely clear in vs. 8: "As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same."

Notice first how true this is. Many of us could say "amen" to this observation. Doesn't Scripture teach that "you reap whatever you sow" (Gal. 6:8)? Yes, but Scripture and experience also teach that others can sow bad seed into our lives (see Matt. 13:24-25). Not everything that happens to people is the direct or even indirect result of their own actions. If, then, we see a "crop" of trouble in someone's life, we should be careful whom we identify as the sower of that seed. It may or may not have been the person suffering the troubles. In many cases people are dealing with the consequences of their own decisions and the treatment they have received from others--good or bad. Eliphaz was right to see that Job was dealing with a "crop" of trouble; Eliphaz was wrong to conclude that Job was at that point harvesting what he had sown.

Job Responds to Eliphaz (6:1-7:21)

From this lengthy speech, let's notice just a couple of things. Job's tone is the same as in his earlier outburst (ch. 3). He expresses his desire that God would just go ahead and finish him off to end his suffering: "O that I might have my request, and that God would grant my desire; that it would please God to crush me, that he would let loose his hand and cut me off!" (6:8-9). But his complaint now also includes words directed toward Eliphaz: "My companions [brothers] are treacherous" (6:15); "you see my

calamity, and are afraid" (6:21). He challenges Eliphaz and the others with these words: "Teach me, and I will be silent; make me understand how I have gone wrong" (6:24).

Bildad the Shuhite (8:1-22)

Bildad carries forward the same accusation earlier made by Eliphaz: surely Job must have done something wrong to bring all these troubles on himself. He asks, "Does God pervert justice?" (8:2), which is really a rebuke of Job for even suggesting that God has been unjust in his treatment of Job. The really cruel thing is what Bildad says in vs. 4: "If your children sinned against him, he delivered them into the power of their transgression." In other words, Job's sons and daughters "had it coming!"

Bildad doesn't have hateful thoughts toward Job or his dead children; he doesn't mean to be cruel. But his theology of suffering (why bad things happen) forces him to this conclusion. Tact might have kept him from saying it, but let's give him credit for trying to be a true friend of Job. (Remember Prov. 27:6--"Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts.") Bildad's prescription for Job's ills calls for him to get right with God: "If you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore to you your rightful place" (8:6), for "God will not reject a blameless person" (8:20).

Job Responds to Bildad (9:1-10:22)

Job's major theme in chapter 9 is that he cannot "contend" with God on equal footing (vss. 3, 19, 32-33). "Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him; I must appeal for mercy to my accuser" (vs. 15). But at this point, after all that has happened, Job's confidence in the mercy of God is shaken to the core: "If I summoned him and he answered me, I do not believe that he would listen to my voice, for he crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause" (9:16-17). Since Job's complaint is against God, and since there is no higher court or neutral judge to whom Job can appeal, his case is hopeless. Job has resigned himself to not being able to prove his innocence--not because he believes he is guilty, but because he cannot force God to listen.

Zophar the Naamathite (11:1-20)

Zophar's speech was quoted in part above. Note that he takes issue with Job's claim to innocence in the strongest way: "God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves" (11:6, NRSV; compare NIV: "God has even forgotten some of your sin"). Zophar has the same prescription for Job as Bildad offered: get right with God and your life will go right. "If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away . . . . Surely then . . . you will be secure, and will not fear" (vss. 14-15).

Job Responds to Zophar (12:1-14:22)

Job's initial reply to Zophar can only be described as sarcastic: "No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you" (12:2). "You guys think you're so smart!" would be another way of putting it. But Job's friends have shed no real light on his situation, for everything they have said Job already knew (12:3), as far as the generally true relationship between iniquity and trouble in life. The problem is that all trouble in human life cannot be traced directly to someone's act of sin. To say that sin will bring trouble into someone's life is a truism; Job's friends are making a false application of that truism by turning it around, as though every trouble was traceable to a specific sin.

To his friends Job says, "What you know, I also know" (13:2); "you are worthless physicians" (13:4); "If you would only keep silent, that would be your wisdom!" (13:5); "your maxims are proverbs of ashes, your defenses are defenses of clay" (13:12). Beginning in 13:20, Job addresses God with his questions and complaints: "How many are my iniquities and my sins? . . . Why do you hide your face, and count me as your enemy?" (13:23-24).

Job continues to address God in chapter 14, a passage containing some of the more well known verses of the book. Comparing the human life to that of a tree cut down (vss. 7ff.), Job asks, "If a man dies, will he live again?" (14:14, NIV). It might be too much to call this question a hint of immortality; there is so much despair in the context. The severed tree seems to have more hope (vs. 7) than the dead man which Job expects soon to be. But verse 14 continues: "All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come" (NIV). The word translated "renewal" in the NIV is translated as "release" in the NRSV, as "change" in the NKJV and NASV. What is Job expecting? Release from the misery of this life into nothingness? Change from death into a new dimension of life? It is not possible to say with certainty, but it might be helpful to observe that the word translated as "renewal" or "release" is the same word translated in verse 7 as "sprout." It would seem (from the context of verses 7-15) that Job might be contemplating at least the possibility that God will not allow him to perish utterly, that there is something in him that God will preserve and bring to life again.

If there is a hint of such hope here, it is vague and suggestive, rather than confident and robust. There is not yet the kind of clarity of expectation that can be found in the New Testament or even in Isaiah 26:19, Psalm 16, 17, 73, or Daniel 12:2. And we would have to say that Job 14 continues in verses 18-22 in a very pessimistic tone.

Does Job Still Have Hope? (19:25-27)

Job comes much closer to expressing a clear hope of resurrection in this passage:

25For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
26and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,
27whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!

Job's hopes in this lifetime have been cruelly dashed. But he still knows that God, his Redeemer, lives, and that God will not perish even if Job does. And somehow, even though Job does not know exactly how, God's character assures Job of a future. That God will "stand upon the earth" means that God's purposes will prevail. The goodness of God's purposes has been Job's confidence in the past, at least until this terrible plague of troubles descended upon him. Even now, Job is unwilling or unable to let go of this knowledge of God as his Redeemer.

It's as though Job is saying, "He hasn't redeemed me out of these troubles yet, but he is still my Redeemer." One thing Job surely knows: there is no other redeemer. Job doesn't say how his skin can be destroyed and yet in his flesh he will still see God. Job's expectation is that he will, not how he will. Job's words here sound all the more powerful

to us when we remember that he lived many centuries before the coming of Christ. Job had no real model for expecting to have a resurrection body some day. In fact, if you look at his words closely here, you'll see no idea of a "glorified body." His confidence here is of a minimal kind, but it is nevertheless powerful precisely because it is based on the revealed nature of God as Redeemer. Job's hope--his only hope at this point--is that his Redeemer will be true to his own nature as Redeemer.

The other thing that's very important to note here is Job's expectation of seeing God. That expectation is mentioned no less than three times in these verses (twice in vs. 27). In the last part of the Book of Job (chapters 38-42), Job does see God, and it changes the way he sees everything else.

Summary of Chapters 4-37

From the beginning of chapter 3 through chapter 37, the book of Job consists of speeches (dramatized and expressed in poetic form) by Job and the other characters who address him in his troubles. In general the other characters exhort Job to submit to God's justice and repent of his sins, which they assume he must have committed to deserve all this. Job maintains his innocence in the face of their accusations, and he questions the justice of God. Like human beings throughout the earth and throughout recorded history, Job is struggling to understand what is happening; he is struggling to cope with burdens which are overwhelming; he is seeking to maintain his integrity in the face of circumstances so adverse that even his friends suspect he has done something evil to deserve it; he is trying to find a reason to hope when all the available evidence suggests that his previous hopes were illusions. As happens from time to time with human beings, Job is grappling with pain so pervasive and deep that the ideas and convictions of his previous life are being questioned and found inadequate to bring comfort.

For Job, as for countless other human beings, life "isn't fair." It no longer appears--as Job had once been able to assume--that a good God is in control. Nothing Job had previously experienced or known had prepared him for this hour, and he cries out in confusion, frustration, and bitter disappointment. Nothing his friends can say will make the pain go away. Indeed their attempts to show him the way out only deepen his bitterness. Job has no answer which seems to fit the situation, and neither do his friends with their theology of blaming Job for his problems.

Questions from LessonMaker software, by NavPress
OPEN IT
1. When is it hard to accept the advice of a friend?

EXPLORE IT
2. According to Eliphaz, why do bad things happen to people? (4:7-11)

3. What did Eliphaz tell Job to do? (5:27)

4. What did Job say about his friends? (6:14-27)

5. Why did Bildad say God punished Job's children? (8:4)

6. What did Bildad say God would do if Job was pure and upright? (8:5-7)

7. What did Job say about life after death? (14:7-14) (Compare 19:25-27.)

GET IT
8. What was wrong with Eliphaz's advice?

9. Why might you be tempted to think that bad things happen only to people who somehow deserve it?

APPLY IT
10. What is one way in which you will be more sensitive when giving advice to someone who is hurting?

Lesson 8
Job: Hearing Questions from the Answer

Coming to the End of Human Explanations

In the previous lesson we sampled some of Job's dialogue with his three friends, which goes from chapter 3 through chapter 31. One further aspect of this prolonged human conversation should be noted in preparation for the main focus of this lesson: In that long dialogue Job is the only one to speak directly to God. Job's friends speak only to Job about God; Job speaks to his friends about God, but he also speaks to God about his situation. In other words, Job's friends "never pray, only preach" while Job's "every word is uttered either to God or in his presence." (Peter Kreeft, Three Philosophies of Life, p. 90). Finally, in this lesson, God speaks directly to Job.

Job asked repeatedly for God to listen to him. Repeatedly he expressed longing for an opportunity to make his defense, confident that he could make a good case for his innocence and the injustice of the calamities which had come to him (e.g., 23:4, 10). The climax of Job's appeal comes in 31:5-40, where we see a long series of "if . . .then" statements: "If" I have done anything wrong to deserve this suffering, "then" let God convict and punish me. But Job's complaint is that God has remained silent; there has been no "prosecution case" made to show Job's guilt. God has not shown up "in court" to hear or answer Job's protests of innocence: "Oh, that I had one to hear me! (Here is my signature! let the Almighty answer me!) Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary!" (Job 31:35. Job's reference to his "adversary"--"accuser" in NIV--is a reference to God; remember that Job is unaware that Satan is the immediate instigator of his troubles, with God's permission of course.) This strongly worded desire to speak to God will stand out in stark contrast to the way Job actually reacts once God reveals himself and starts asking Job questions (see 40:3-5; 42:1-6, discussed below).

In Job 31:40, we read that "the words of Job are ended." And so were the words of his three friends ended (32:1): "So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes." This uneasy conclusion to the preceding dialogue among Job and his three friends is followed by an extended speech by a new person, Elihu (chs. 32-37), who is "angry at Job because he justified himself rather than God" (32:2). He was also angry at Job's three friends "because they had found no answer" (vs. 30) for Job, who got in the "last word" in their dialogue. Although younger than Job's three friends (vs. 4), Elihu shows a keen sense of the situation. He is exactly right: Job has been defending his own reputation and sense of integrity rather than bearing witness to the righteousness of God. In that perspective, Elihu prepares the way for the revelatory words from God in chapters 38-42.

Elihu's words are a sustained rebuke of Job's charge that God was treating him unjustly. Since "God is greater than any mortal" (33:12), and since our very existence depends on God's gift of life (34:14-15), how can Job or anyone else charge God with unjust treatment of those to whom he has given life? God owes us nothing, and we owe him everything. Our righteousness cannot put God in our debt, cannot obligate him to treat us in a certain way. While it may be to our advantage to avoid sin, we cannot complain if our righteousness has not been rewarded in the way we expected. Our righteousness does not give God anything for which he is now indebted to us (35:3-7).

On the contrary, the obligation is all on our part, not only for our own behavior in obedience and gratitude to God but also for the effect our behavior has on others (35:8).

Elihu sounds more than a little arrogant when he says things like 36:4: "For truly my words are not false; one who is perfect in knowledge is with you." And in essence his theological understanding of suffering is not any more adequate than that offered by the other three friends of Job. Elihu maintains that those who listen to and serve God will "complete their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasantness" (36:11). Nevertheless, the primary thrust of his speech is not to get Job to repent of some hidden sin, but rather to acknowledge the transcendent greatness of God: "See, God is exalted in his power; who is a teacher like him? Who has prescribed for him his way, or who can say, 'You have done wrong'?" (36:22-23). From 36:24 to 37:13, Elihu describes the greatness of the Creator, and then he says to Job: "Stop and consider the wondrous works of God" (36:14). Mere mortals such as Job should fear God, for "he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit" (37:24).

We cannot tell whether Elihu's words satisfied Job any more than the arguments already made by Zophar, Bildad, and Eliphaz. The next person to speak is not Job in response to Elihu, but God in response to Job.

God's Revelation of Power (38:1-42:10)

Finally Job gets what he repeatedly said he wanted. Here is God, and he invites Job to speak to him--not to voice his complaints and make his defense, but to answer God's questions. If Job can answer these questions from God, then God will agree to answer the questions Job has been asking God. The only problem is that God's questions turn out to be more unanswerable than Job's. Here again, we will only sample the interrogation.

God's questions begin with this challenge in 38:2-3: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me." The questions put to Job are intended to make him aware of the greatness of God, but also of the great limitations of human knowledge, including Job's. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements--surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?" (38:4-5). The Lord's words are just a bit sarcastic, when he says, "surely you know!" Of course Job does not know, but he had been claiming to have sufficient knowledge to be confident of his innocence before God. There is reproof of Job's attitude in God's wording; Job needs to admit that God knows a great deal more than Job does--about everything, including Job.

God's questions are just beginning. "Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place . . .?" (38:12f). Have you ever been in charge of running the universe? Would you know how, if you were put in charge? "Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, 'Here we are'?" (38:34-35). Can you control the rain, the thunder, and lightning? Do they come and go at your command? If neither the sunrise nor the thunderstorm is under your control, Job, what about the birds of the air? "Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads it wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high?" (39:26-27).

After a couple of chapters of such questions, the Lord gives Job a chance to speak, but it's really more like a command to respond: "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond" (40:2). Here, Job, is the opportunity you've been asking for, to take God to task for the way the universe (especially the part around you) is being run. What will you say?

Job says, "See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further" (40:4-5). When Job says "once . . . twice," he is saying, in effect, "I think I've said too much already! If it's okay with you, Lord, I think I'll just keep my mouth shut."

But the Lord is unwilling to let the matter drop yet. He resumes his challenging questions: "Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you will declare to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?" (40:7-8). In reality, that was what Job had been doing, accusing God (who had remained silent until now) of treating him unjustly. Job had emphatically insisted on his innocence. If Job was being punished for wickedness he had not committed, then God must be unjust. Now that God is speaking to Job, does Job want to make that accusation to his face?

Note the assumption of Job and his friends alike--an assumption which God does not challenge here but which the Book of Job proves false--the assumption that Job's suffering was punishment. Job's friends thought God must be justly punishing Job; Job had maintained that it was unjust. The effect of God's interrogation is to put Job's situation in such a light that Job stops questioning God's justice, even though he is not given an explanation for his sufferings. God does not say that Job's suffering was punishment. On the contrary, what God said about him in 1:8 and 2:3 affirms Job's innocence, that he did not deserve punishment. What God says to Job in chapters 38-42, in essence, is this: "Job, you don't know enough about the universe and my works to question my justice." That is pretty much the sum of God's answer to Job, which is not really an explanation of why Job had been suffering, and it is certainly not an apology. God owes explanations and apologies to no one!

In chapters 38-39, God took his illustrations from a variety of things in the universe. In chapters 40-41, two extended illustrations strengthen the point being made by the Lord. In 40:15-24, God refers to "Behemoth." In other contexts, this word simply refers to "animals" in general or "cattle." In this context, it obviously refers to some very large animal. Interpretations vary as to the exact significance. Perhaps an elephant or a hippopotamus is described. Some interpreters say we should think in terms of a monster (here a land monster; in ch. 41 a sea monster). Either would serve the purpose of God's statement, which is that God is the maker of life-forms which Job (and we) would find intimidating in their size and might. The same God who made Job made the huge animal.

The next illustration is even lengthier, taking up all of chapter 41. "Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down its tongue with a cord?" (41:1). "Leviathan" is as debated as "behemoth." The most frequently suggested meaning is "crocodile" (see vss. 13, 15), or possibly "whale." Possibly "sea monster" is what we need to picture (see vss. 19-21, which make us think of "fire-breathing dragon"). Whether crocodile, whale, or monster, the description is powerful and even amusing in places. "Will it make many supplications to you? Will it speak soft words to you? Will it make a covenant with you to be taken as your servant forever? Will you play with it as

with a bird, or will you put it on a leash for your girls?" (41:3-5). "Lay hands on it . . . you will not do it again!" (vs. 8).

The portrait of this beast, which continues through vs. 34, is fascinating, so much so that you could almost miss the point if you forget who is saying this to whom, under what circumstances. God is saying to Job, "I made this terrifying creature. You wouldn't want to challenge it; why would you dare to challenge its maker?"

Job's Answer (42:1-6)

Well, Job does not want to wrestle with Leviathan, and he does not want (any longer) to argue with God. His words to God are contrite, yet responsive to specific questions put to him by the Lord. Job (quoting from the NIV) says:

> 2I know that you can do all things;
> no plan of yours can be thwarted.
> 3You asked, "Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?"
> [referring back to 38:2]
> Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
> things too wonderful for me to know.
> 4You said, "Listen now, and I will speak;
> I will question you, and you shall answer me."
> [referring back to 38:3 and 40:7]
> 5My ears had heard of you
> but now my eyes have seen you.
> 6Therefore I despise myself
> and repent in dust and ashes.

Job acknowledges the sovereign power of God and repents for his wrongdoing--not wrongdoing which caused the disasters to his property and family, but the wrongdoing of charging God with injustice. Because of a greater and more personal revelation of God, Job now knows that God is ultimately beyond full human comprehension and that whatever God wants to do with his creation he can, and no one can call God to account.

Job's Vindication (42:7-17)

At this point we could say that God is vindicated against Job's previous charge of injustice. But God is not through speaking, for God wants more than to vindicate his justice; he wants to vindicate Job against the charges made against him by Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar! God says to Eliphaz that he and the two others (no mention of Elihu is made here) "have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (vs. 7). After telling Eliphaz to offer sacrifices to God and ask for Job's intercessory prayer, God repeats his assessment that Job had spoken truthfully about God, while Eliphaz and friends had not (vs. 8).

Since God has just used chapters 38-41 to correct Job's perspective, what does it mean for God to say that Job has spoken what is right? Job's main contention in the debate with his friends was that he was innocent of any wrongdoing which could have earned these troubles. God is saying that Job was right in that contention. The terrible losses of property, family, and health were not to be blamed on Job's supposed sins, nor

on his lack of faith, nor on anything else under Job's control or for which Job could be held responsible. Everything Job had said about God's treatment of him may not have been correct (as Job admitted in 42:1-6), but his basic argument about his innocence has now been vindicated by the Lord Himself (recall 19:25; Job's confidence that his Redeemer/Vindicator lives and would eventually "stand upon the earth" has been vindicated!).

Job had been humbled by God's revelation in chapters 38-41, but so were his friends. Can you imagine how they felt when they were told that they needed the intercession of the man they had so persistently accused of being in the wrong? They did as instructed by the Lord, and they were forgiven for their misrepresentation of God (vs. 9).

How had they misrepresented God? Besides their misguided advice to Job to confess sins which he had not in fact committed, they had pictured God as the enforcer of a moral code which they professed to understand. According to their understanding of that moral code, human suffering was caused by human sin; therefore, suffering humans, such as Job, needed to repent of sin. According to their understanding of the moral code (which they claimed God enforced), righteous behavior was rewarded by God's blessings of health and prosperity. If you lack health or prosperity, it's up to you to do the right things to get them.

The insidious nature of their understanding is that it's partly true, close enough to the real truth to be persuasive, especially because it appeals to our human pride to think that our situation and destiny can be under our control. But God says Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad have not spoken truthfully about him. Job's confusion and questions were better than their confident conclusions! God was less offended by Job's insistence that God answer him than he was by his friends' presumption in speaking for God!

So what is the relationship between righteousness and blessing, between sin and suffering? Although the Book of Job does not try to answer that question completely, it does say that one explanation is wrong--the explanation that would put humans totally in control and responsible for everything that happens to them or in the world around them. Obviously we are responsible for our choices, our actions, and our attitudes, but we are not responsible for everything that happens. Our choices have consequences, but all consequences are not traceable to our choices.

Another way to express the relationship between our choices and God's blessings avoids the error for which God rebuked Job's friends: Our behavior can be the required condition for God's blessings, but our behavior cannot be the cause of God's blessings. Job's friends were right in maintaining that God has a right to withhold blessing from evildoers and reward those who obey him. There is plenty of Scripture also to make the point that God can require that certain conditions be met in order for us to receive certain blessings. (Deuteronomy 28 is a famous example of God setting forth conditions for Israel's blessing, along with promised curses to follow disobedience.) But when you have fulfilled the conditions, you have still not become the cause of your blessing! If you are blessed, the cause is always the same--God's steadfast love. The cause can never be some kind of obligation imposed on God by our obedience, our faith, our giving, our acts of kindness toward others, nor any other thing.

This may seem to be a subtle point, but it is actually fundamental to our understanding of God and to our confidence in relationship to him. The impact of the

Book of Job is not to undermine our confidence in God's will to bless but to focus on confidence on God's will to bless rather than on our ability to perform adequately to secure the blessings. The "blameless" behavior of Job (1:1; 2:3) was not adequate to make his life painless. Being even better than Job (if that is possible for us) will not guarantee us a pain-free life either. That is not the way it works, and that is not the purpose ultimately of knowing God, obeying God, and serving God. Before Job's health is restored, before God blesses him with more children and great material blessings, Job is satisfied by God's presence and God's word to him. God alone (not his blessings) must ultimately be the adequate reason for our righteous behavior. God alone (not our performance) will always be the cause of our blessings. (The purpose of knowing Jesus, for Paul, was to know him in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings. See Philippians 3:10.)

Epilogue: Job's Blessings Restored (42:10-17)

It is interesting that God's blessings come in fresh abundance to Job after he prays for his errant friends (42:10), but it is just as interesting that the Book of Job does not show God shifting the blame for Job's painful experiences away from himself. Verse 11, in fact, says that Job's family and friends "comforted him for all the evil [i.e., the trouble] that the LORD had brought upon him." We might wish to supplement that statement with the perspective of chapters one and two, as well as with the more developed description of the activity of Satan in the NT, but we should not miss the radically monotheistic message of the book of Job: God, the Creator of heaven and earth, is sovereign over every human life, and he cannot be tried and found guilty of injustice by any human accusation. God holds humans responsible for our actions, and he holds Satan responsible for his, but God never pulls back from his responsibility for the universe and everything in it. The "evil" that had happened to Job was not caused by God's direct activity, but he had allowed it, for his own purposes to be served.

Because of God's blessings, Job became even wealthier than before (vs. 12), and again he was given "seven sons and three daughters" (vs. 13; compare 1:2). Of course, Job would still have had sorrow over the ten children who had earlier died, but that is not really the point here. The point here is that the one who gave him his earlier blessings (including children) gave him new blessings, again not because Job had earned them but because God wanted to do so.

Summary of the Message of Job

As Job is struggling with the effects without knowing the causes, the sympathetic reader might wish that somehow Job could find out who is really responsible for his troubles, so that he can blame Satan rather than questioning God's justice. The reader might even wish that Job would turn and rebuke Satan's attacks. Such responses from the modern reader might be natural, but they would not be in keeping with the specific purpose of the book of Job.

In the Book of Job, Job never gets an explanation of why God allowed Satan to torment him so; Job never even gets a report on the dispute between Satan and God in chapters one and two. Job and his friends dispute the probable cause of the evil effects in Job's life. When God speaks, it silences these disputes, not by answering the question about the causes behind the effects but by putting the dispute into a different frame of reference. The answer which Job gets for all his questioning can be put quite simply:

God is God, and Job is not. When God himself finally begins to speak to Job--after long speeches by Job and his various "comforters"--God shifts the focus from Job's questions to questions which God asks Job. It turns out that God can ask bigger questions than Job can! God is bigger and wiser than all the wisdom of Job or his friends.

Jesus and Job

Rabbi Harold Kushner has written a popular book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), in which he deals with the Book of Job and with own experience of suffering (the loss of his son). Kushner has many good and helpful things to say on this topic, particularly with regard to human responses to difficulties. Ultimately, however, he resolves the dilemma of how a good God allows bad things to happen to good people by denying the omnipotence of God, i.e., God cannot keep some things from happening. He takes this position because he cannot accept what seems to him to be the only logical alternative--to deny the goodness of God. I have heard Kushner speak on this dilemma (on television), and I am impressed with the depth of his understanding and the wisdom and compassion with which he addresses the issue. I must say, however, that the Christian does have something to say about this which goes beyond Kushner's alternatives. (Peter Kreeft, Three Philosophies of Life, p. 68, declares that Rabbi Kushner tries to interpret the Book of Job in a way which makes it contradict the clear teaching of the rest of the Bible, i.e., that God is omnipotent. Indeed, the whole point of God's address to Job in chapters 38-41 is that God is the Almighty. Kushner's decision to believe that God cannot prevent some bad things from happening may be personally comforting, but it does not accurately reflect the teaching of Job. See the end of this lesson for other titles to explore this subject further.)

With the cross of Jesus (and the resurrection) we have a revelation of the heart of God which does not give an explanation for human suffering but which gives us something infinitely better: a solution from God himself. God's solution to the problem of "bad things happening to good people" is to have the worst thing possible happen to the best man ever (Jesus) and then raising him from the dead with power over sin, death, and the grave. If Job thought he suffered trouble which he had not earned, much more did Jesus do so, and all for our deliverance. That, after all, is what we really need for dealing with the problem of evil--not just an explanation but a deliverance. God could give an explanation from a distance, removed from the suffering himself. To give a deliverance, God took our sorrows upon himself in the person of Jesus. With the overcoming power of God bearing our greatest griefs, their power to destroy us is destroyed.

We have, because of the gospel, a tremendous advantage over Job in dealing with the problem of undeserved suffering. I do not mean by that to diminish the genuine suffering (physical, emotional, and other) which happen to us all in some measure and to some people in tragic measure. But the gospel message of Jesus' cross and resurrection tells us that God is not ashamed of the sufferer, that God is with the sufferer even when it seems like he is not, and that God will deliver the faithful one who commits his way to the Lord. The deliverance may not come immediately, but it will come. It may not prevent death, but God has already provided in Jesus our deliverance on the other side of death. Job simply had to bow to the sovereignty of God; we too bow to the sovereignty

of God, but we also rejoice, knowing that nothing can "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (see Rom. 8:31-39).

Because of the gospel, we know that God loves us so much he is willing to let Christ, his spotless Son, take up our griefs, bear our sins, and utter our cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). If God in Christ can bear our burden to break its power over us, that means he is with us now in our time of feeling the most alone. Even if we feel as Job felt during his great trial, we have in the gospel an assurance that goes beyond the blessings which Job received at the end of the book. In the Book of Job, the end of his story was "Job died" (42:17); from the gospel of Jesus we know that was not the end of Job's story, and we know that death will not be the end of our story.

*For other titles on the topic of suffering, especially by the innocent or righteous, let me recommend the following titles for those who are interested in further reading:

Warren Wiersbe, Why Us? When Bad Things Happen to God's People
(Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984)

Philip Yancey, Disappointment With God (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

Philip Yancey, Where is God When It Hurts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977).

All of the above, as well as the books by Kreeft and Kushner, are in our church library.

Questions from LessonMaker software, by NavPress

OPEN IT
1. If you could ask God any question about life, what would it be?

EXPLORE IT
2. Based on the evidence Job supplied in his own defense, what kind of man was he? (31:1-40)

3. Why did Elihu become angry with Job? (32:1-5)

4. According to Elihu, how does a person's sin or righteousness affect God? (35:1-8)

5. What is the focus of the Lord's first round of questions to Job? (38:4-41)

6. How did Job respond to God's challenge? (40:4-5)

7. Why did Job say he would repent? (42:4-6)

8. What did the Lord tell Eliphaz and his two friends to do? (42:8-9)

GET IT

9. What point did God want Job to understand through this series of questions?

10. What questions did God's reply to Job leave unanswered or unresolved?

11. How did God's reply change Job's attitude?

12. Why was it necessary for Job to repent?

13. Why did God have Job pray for his three friends?

APPLY IT

15. How can you be more respectful and less demanding of God?

Summary of this Series on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job

Solomon said that wisdom brought sorrow (Eccl. 1:18). What kind of sympathy do you think he might have gotten from Job?! Probably not much, but perhaps he would have gotten this reply: "Yes, wisdom brings sorrow, but I have found that sorrow can bring wisdom, especially if you don't give up on God."

summary of series

Proverbs: Wisdom Through Observation
Proverbs tells us that life can be good
if we do the right thing (i.e., the wise thing).

Ecclesiastes: Wisdom Through Questioning
Ecclesiastes tells us that life will end
no matter what we do.

Job: Wisdom Through Suffering
Job tells us that life can be painful
even if we do the right thing.

Jesus is also the answer to the questions of Ecclesiastes,
for he is the purpose--the revealed purpose of God for humanity.
God's purpose in creating us to begin with was that we might be in fellowship with him and serve and honor him out of love. Once our fellowship was broken, our purpose became so clouded that the wisest man of the Old Testament could only say, after asking all the questions, "Fear God and keep his commandments, because you will have to give an account to him after this life is over." This is wise realism, but it is also joyless. Contrast that with the rejoicing of Jesus in Matt. 11--Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit because of what God the Father had revealed to the simple disciples of Jesus (what had been hidden from the wisest, including Solomon). To Jesus' disciples are revealed the grace of God's kingdom, the inbreaking of God's power and purpose, the very purpose which Solomon vainly sought. What Solomon sought, Jesus gives to his disciples.

Notice also the connection between Jesus' suffering and eternal joy. Suffering is never described as a good thing in itself, but the results of suffering can be good. Nowhere is that more the case than with Jesus' suffering on the cross. The Book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus endured the suffering and humiliation of the cross because of "the joy that was set before him" (Heb. 12:2). Here is God's Wisdom himself, incarnate in the flesh, acting out the ultimate instance of Wisdom's willingness to suffer for the sake of true joy--the joy of obeying the will of God the Father, the joy of obtaining the object of perfect love: the redemption of God's creation, us.

Contrast this with the objects that we often seek through obtaining more knowledge. We will gladly receive and use information which promises to empower us to make ourselves happy, more content and comfortable. Look how different wisdom is. With more wisdom comes more sorrow (see Ecc. 1:18) because there is greater awareness of how much needs to be fixed, how much pain--needless, pointless pain--there is in the world. Such wisdom brings sadness, but it also calls out to God for deliverance, and in obedience to God's direction makes whatever sacrifice is required to see the joy of God break through in transforming power. Human-centered knowledge will try to solve problems with minimum discomfort. God-centered wisdom knows that there will be no "cheap fixes."

God-centered wisdom also knows that God alone understands the true depth of human need. Thus human-centered knowledge can never solve all the problems of human suffering. Even humans working with bits and pieces of God's revelation (like Job's friends might have used words that sound like they came from Proverbs, or even Deuteronomy)--even humans trying to answer human questions with divinely inspired words cannot fully get to the bottom of things with a solution, only with speculation and superficial "explanations" which cannot heal. We need more than human explanations, even explanations which attempt to explain using divine revelation. We need more than explanations, no matter how accurate they are. We need more than explanations; we need deliverance.