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April 29th: Job 28 & James 2:14-26

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Where is wisdom to be found? Faith without works is dead.

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Transcript

Job chapter 28. Surely there is a mine for silver, and a place for gold that they refine. Iron is taken out of the earth, and copper is smelted from the ore.

Man puts an end to darkness, and searches out to the farthest limit, the ore in gloom and deep darkness. He opens shafts in a valley away from where anyone lives. They are forgotten by travelers.

They hang in the air far away from mankind. They swing to and fro. As for the earth, out of it comes bread, but underneath it is turned up as by fire.

Its stones are the place of sapphires, and it has dust of gold. That path no bird of prey knows, and the falcon's eye has not seen it. The proud beasts have not trodden it.

The lion has not passed over it. Man puts his hand to the flinty rock, and overturns mountains by the roots. He cuts out channels in the rocks, and his eyes sees every precious thing.

He dams up the streams so that they do not trickle, and the thing that is hidden he brings out to light. But where shall wisdom be found? Where is the place of understanding? Man does not know its worth, and it is not found in the land of the living. The deep says, it is not in me, and the sea says, it is not with me.

It cannot be bought for gold, and silver cannot be weighed as its price. It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, in precious onyx or sapphire. Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold.

No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal. The price of wisdom is above pearl, and of pearls. The topaz of Ethiopia cannot equal it, nor can it be valued in pure gold.

From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air. Abaron and Dath say, we have heard a rumor of it with our ears. God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.

For he looks to the ends of the earth, and sees everything under the heavens. When he gave to the wind its weight, and apportioned the waters by measure, when he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the lightning of the thunder, then he saw it and declared it. He established it and searched it out.

And he said to man, behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding. Job chapter 28 is a remarkably beautiful poem, but it represents a great shift in the tone of the book. From the fierce passion of Job's defence and the speeches of the friends, we come to a rich poetic meditation upon wisdom.

A number of commentators have spoken of it as an interlude between the cycle of the dialogues with the three friends and the sections that follow, the rest of Job's speech, the speech of Elihu, the arrival and the speeches of God, and then the epilogue. There was another interlude back in chapter 3, in Job's cursing of the day of his birth, but this poem doesn't just represent a shift in the tone, it also seems to be a shift in the subject matter. There is no mention of Job's defence here, rather it is a meditation upon wisdom more generally.

There's no address to an audience, there's no clear expression of the feelings of the speaker. As David Clines puts it, it is completely externalised. Speaker and audience are not identified.

The refrain is an important part of it, and helps us to understand what the poem is about. In verse 12 and 20 we find statements of the type, but where shall wisdom be found, and

where is the place of understanding? It moves towards the final verse, which is, as Clines calls it, the nodal verse. It's the revelation that answers the great question of the chapter.

And he said to man, Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding. The general scholarly opinion holds that this poem is not the words of Job, many attribute it to the voice of the narrator of the book. It's the sort of calm eye of the storm.

It encourages the reader, temporarily, to stand back and reflect upon the deeper themes of the book. What is this all about? When you step back from the immediacy of the drama, what is the message of the book of Job? Clines makes the case that the speech here is from Elihu. It's the conclusion, he argues, to Elihu's fourth speech.

He raises the possibility that the order of the strips of the scroll of the book of Job were accidentally disordered in the process of transmission. Elihu makes the most use of the language of wisdom, and so this makes most sense coming from his mouth. I'm unpersuaded.

However, Clines does highlight some important questions. The obvious one is, what is the poem doing here, and what purpose is it serving? One could call it an interlude, but why would we have such an interlude at this particular juncture? Also, what is this question of where wisdom is to be found doing in the book of Job more generally? What does it have to do with the material that surrounds it, with the interests of Job, his friends and Elihu? What does it have to do with the broader message of the text? Why would Job, for instance, be asking this question at this particular juncture? Gerald Janssen, Robert Alden, Toby Sumter and a number of other commentators argue that these are the words of Job. I'm not completely persuaded.

Even though these words aren't marked off from the rest of Job's speeches by a formal introductory statement, it seems clear that they stand apart from what surrounds them. While some commentators see this as an independent poem that has somehow found its way into the book of Job, this chapter is not detached from its surroundings. Robert Feil argues that chapter 28, and indeed the entirety of chapters 26 to 31, function something like the voice of a chorus in a play.

They collect and comment upon the themes that are surfacing to this point. Feil points out that this chapter identifies the question behind all of the other questions of the book, and it also serves as a metaphor for the whole book. He argues that the structure of the chapter is as follows, verses 1 to 11, the mining for precious stones and metals as a metaphor for the quest of wisdom, verses 12 to 22, the inaccessibility of wisdom, verses 23 to 28, wisdom and creation.

The mine, he argues, can be seen as an image of Job's suffering to this point. It isn't

detached from the preceding and the following chapters. In particular, it anticipates much of the creation imagery of God's speech that will come later, for instance in chapter 38, verses 16 to 20.

Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this. Where is the way to the dwelling of light? And where is the place of darkness, that you may take it to its territory, and that you may discern the path to its home? Reading through this chapter, we might also think of the way that it connects to some of the images that Job has used of his own suffering. He is often referred to images of Sheol and the underworld.

This might fit well with the imagery of mining in the depths of the earth. We might also think of the way that he has described himself as gold to be tested in chapter 23, verse 10. But he knows the way that I take.

When he has tried me, I shall come out as gold. In verse 1 of chapter 28, surely there is a mine for silver, and a place for gold that they refine. This suggests to the reader, I believe, a pregnant analogy between Job and his sufferings and the mining in the depths of the earth.

Job is experiencing something of the depths of human experience. He is descending into the gloom of human suffering, seeking if he can mine there for wisdom. The poem concerning wisdom does not tell us at the outset what its theme is.

Rather, the speaker gives a description of the processes by which men seek for items of immense value, like silver, gold, and precious stones. Discovery of these items requires a descent into the depths, away from human habitation, into the darkness, the silence, and solitude. It is a place of danger and peril, a place where only the bravest will venture.

The quest for these precious stones and metals sets man apart from the animals. The birds and the beasts do not enter these subterranean vaults. The lengthy description of the processes of mining and seeking out precious stones and jewels might make the reader wonder what the point of all of this is.

What is this analogy about? In verse 12, it is revealed to us. But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Wisdom, it appears, is inaccessible. It cannot be found in the land of the living.

Question concerning its location, the vast deep and the great sea, both deny that it is in them. If it can't be located by mining, nor can it be purchased with the great treasures that man possesses, evaluation cannot be placed upon it. There is nothing of like worth

that could be exchanged for it.

All of these are similar images to those we find in the book of Proverbs, in chapter 2 verses 3 to 5 of Proverbs. Yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. Chapter 3 verses 13 to 15.

Blessed is the one who finds wisdom and the one who gets understanding. For the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels and nothing you desire can compare with her.

Chapter 16 verses 16. How much better to get wisdom than gold? To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver. Verse 20 repeats the key theme question.

From where then does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? Once again, it cannot be found by the living. Previously we were told that it is not found in the land of the living. And here we are told in verse 21 that it is hidden from the eyes of all living.

The deep and the sea were interrogated concerning its location back in verse 14 and now it is abandoned and death, the deeper depths. They have heard a rumour but they have nothing more than that to give. So where is wisdom to be found? Verses 23 to 28 give us the answer.

God is the one who knows the way to wisdom. This might seem strange to us. God is the one who has wisdom.

God is the source of wisdom. Why would it speak about God knowing the way to it and knowing its place? Jansons suggests that the answer is found in part in the fact that wisdom is found in act and God's act of creation is the place where wisdom is to be found. In verses 24 to 27 this act of creation is recounted in various of its aspects.

The focus is upon God's power and his ordering of the creation. The creation itself is the product of divine wisdom but it does not contain the wisdom by which it was created. The wisdom is found in the creative act, not the creation in and of itself.

So what then should a human response to wisdom be? Verse 28 has an expression that should be familiar from many other passages in the wisdom material. We find this in Psalm 111 verse 10. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

All who practice it have a good understanding. In Proverbs chapter 1 verse 7 the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

In Proverbs chapter 9 verse 10 the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the

knowledge of the Holy One is insight. Just as in Psalm 111 or in the book of Proverbs the statement here concerning the fear of the Lord is absolutely fundamental. It expresses the core truth that should probably be seen to be at the very heart of the message of the book of Job.

A further indication of this fact can be seen in the way that it is filled out in the expression to turn away from evil is understanding. This return to the theme of the fear of the Lord, defining wisdom as fearing the Lord and turning away from evil should cause the reader to prick up their ears. These are charged expressions.

They appear in the opening verse of the book. There was a man in the land of us whose name was Job and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. In this final climactic statement at the end of the reflective quest of the poem we arrive at a statement that takes us back to the very beginning of the book.

Janzen writes of this such a conclusion may strike one as disappointingly conventional, not to say banal. On the other hand it may be that such a view, once freshly entertained but become banal through superficial or thoughtless repetition, is here presented as renewed and refreshed through the searching reflection in which Job and the reader have been engaged since chapter 3. Not all explorations issue in the discovery of totally new terrain. Sometimes exploration issues in the discovery, as though for the first time, of terrain in which one has always lived.

In such cases this terrain may be occupied by conventional minds and by those newly wakened. The question then, and it is not easily answered, becomes in what sense do they inhabit the same terrain and in what sense are they worlds apart? In terms of chapter 28 verse 28 one may ask whether this conclusion at this point in Job's search is crushingly banal or fresh with chastened profundity. It may depend on how one comes to the conclusion and how one entertains it.

Reading this verse as a reaffirmation in part of the statement of the opening verse of the book may also help us to see Job as having passed through the test and survived it, arriving at the deeper wisdom of seeing that true wisdom is found in fear of the Creator, of the One who in the act of wisdom formed all things. A question to consider. Do you think that it is possible to argue that the question, from where then does wisdom come and where is the place of understanding, is the thematic question of the book of Job? If you do, how would you go about arguing it? How might the prominence of the question in this chapter and poem help us to read the rest of the book? James chapter 2 verses 14 to 26 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, Go in peace, be warmed and filled, without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

But someone will say, You have faith and I have works. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one.

You do well. Even the demons believe and shudder. Do you want to be shown you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works, and the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness, and he was called a friend of God.

You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. James' concern for pure religion continues into the second half of chapter 2. He is concerned here with the reduction of faith to bare profession.

Faith without works, he argues, is like a corpse. It's not a matter of adding works to faith, but rather of works being inseparable from true faith. Perhaps we might also see James continuing some of his concerns about partiality here.

The importance of ministering to needy people within the church sets up the discussion of faith and works. James' treatment of faith and works here is structured as a sort of diatribe against an opponent. James is setting up the voice of someone who holds a position opposed to his own and dialoguing with that throughout.

His concern earlier had clearly been for works of mercy, for concern for the poor and those who are needy, on visiting widows and orphans, keeping oneself unspotted from the world and receiving the poor with a proper welcome in their assemblies. Such concerns might be seen here as well. He begins with an example that shows that a bare expression of goodwill is utterly insufficient for performing the works of mercy.

If a person is poor, unclothed and hungry, they need something a lot more than simple expressions of goodwill and good luck. They need positive assistance, but mere words aren't going to give them that. While the moving of one's heart in concern towards the poor is clearly very important, as is a verbal commitment to their well-being, by themselves those things are not enough.

Rather they must be expressed in a concrete, practical commitment to the well-being of the people in need. Anything short of that is completely futile. And this provides a good analogy for the situation of a faith without works.

Such a faith may be properly disposed in some ways, such a faith may express itself well in orthodox doctrinal commitments, but if it lacks works it's completely ineffectual and

dead. In verse 18 his imagined interlocutor presents two different cases. Here's one person who says he has faith, and here's another person who says he has works.

To which James responds, If you indeed have faith, show me that faith apart from any works, and my faith will be demonstrated by my works. Works are absolutely inseparable from faith. The idea that you could have faith without works is nonsensical.

There are those who will insist that they have faith because they can make the basic creedal commitments, such as the Shema, the statement that the Lord our God is one. But making such a statement has no guarantee of right standing with God. The demons themselves, God's sworn adversaries can make that statement.

And in their case, that statement, far from being assurance of their right standing with God, is a cause of their terror before him. James drives his point home by two great examples from the Old Testament, Abraham and Rahab. Abraham is the paradigmatic Jew, he's the one who's the father of the people of Israel, and Rahab is the paradigmatic Gentile, a once ungodly Canaanite prostitute who was brought into the people of God.

James points to the events of Genesis chapter 22 as proof of Abraham's faith, and the perfection of his faith. Abraham was called to sacrifice his son Isaac. This was the last great test that Abraham faced.

He had been called earlier on to leave his home, to leave behind his past, and in Genesis chapter 22 he was called to sacrifice his future, everything that Isaac represented. As he responded faithfully to this test, he was blessed by the Lord and the promise was confirmed to him. James effectively argues you can't read Genesis chapter 15 verse 6 where we are told that Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness without paying attention to this later part of the story where he is blessed on account of his faithfulness.

Abraham being called a friend of God, someone in good standing with God, is something that arises not merely from his faith but also from such works. And the offering up of Isaac is a completion of Abraham's faith in works. This is what it looks like when faith comes to its maturity.

He appeals to Rahab as well. Rahab was someone who received the word concerning the people of Israel and the way that the Lord was going to give them the land and believed it and as a result she received the messengers and sent them out by another way. While she believed the word of the report, she would not have enjoyed the standing that she enjoyed in the people of God had she not transformed that into the practical action of acting as she did towards the spies.

All of this goes to show, for James, that as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is like a lifeless corpse. A true and active faith is always seen in its

works. Apart from works it is lifeless and useless.

Perhaps one of the most challenging things about this passage is how to relate it to the teaching that Paul has in his epistles. James' interlocutor has an unsettling similarity to a bastardised Paul. There is a very sharp seeming contrast with Paul in some of the statements that he makes in passages such as Romans 3.28, for we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Now compare that to verse 26 of this chapter. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Paul also uses the example of Abraham in chapter 4 of Romans and particularly references Genesis 15.6 about Abraham believing God and it being accounted to him for righteousness.

And so we are left to speculate about the relationship between James and Paul's teaching. Is James directly attacking Paul or is he attacking some straw man of Paul? Both in Acts and in the book of Galatians we see tensions between people from James and people associated with Paul and his message. Considering that by the admission of the apostle Peter and others Paul's teaching was difficult to understand and the fact that there were many teachers going around associated with people like James or Paul who seemed to have a slightly garbled notion of what they were teaching, it might be most likely that James is responding to someone who has taken on some elements of Paul's teaching and has developed it in quite an erroneous direction.

While Galatians chapter 2 and Acts chapter 15 might suggest that James and Paul resolved any initial distrust that might have been between them, it is likely that both faced problems with members of the other person's camp. To understand how to relate the two it is important to stand back and to consider how they are using their terms and the more specific concerns that they have. When Paul talks about works for instance, he is generally talking about works of the law, works that are associated with the Torah that separate Israel from the Gentiles marking them out as the people of God.

For instance in Romans chapter 3 verse 28 the statement is that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. The words of the law there really matter as a qualification of what he means by works. A further thing to consider is the way that Paul is particularly concerned about how one gets standing in the people of God, most particularly how Gentiles enter in the first place.

In this context where he focuses upon faith and rules out works, he is especially focusing upon the fact that Gentiles get into the people of God apart from circumcision, the dietary requirements and other things that would mark out the Jews as Jews. Rather they are accepted as Gentiles through faith on the basis of the achievement of Christ. James however is concerned less with the question of first entry into the people of God and more with the way in which faith works itself out.

Faith is perfected or completed by works. Faith, a wholehearted trust in God that does not express itself in transformed practice, is not really a faith at all. One of the things that Paul is most concerned that we see is that the efficacy of faith for salvation is not situated in its own power to work so much as in its response to God's promise.

It's grasping onto something outside of itself. However James' concern is to show that faith in its proper nature will be expressed in works. There's no such thing as a workless faith.

As we look further in the teaching of Paul it should be clear that he holds much the same thing as James. In passages such as Romans chapter 2 he speaks about a final judgement according to works and he means it. On the last day we will be blessed or we will be condemned on the basis of our works.

The tension that people see between Paul and James is really a tension that can be seen in Paul's own teaching. A tension between our standing in the people of God being on the basis of faith and the fact that we will be judged according to works. Of course this tension is just an apparent one.

The solution is found in the teaching of James here. The solution is that faith is active along with our works and faith is completed by our works. This is not a teaching that works are a different sort of thing that need to be added to faith to make faith effective.

Rather the point is that faith by its very nature will produce works and that as faith grows to maturity works will be an expression of that maturity. On the last day when we are judged according to works, our works will be a manifestation and evidence of our faith. Those works in and of themselves are not things that set us right with God.

Rather what makes those works effective is the fact that faith is active in them. Those works are the fruit of an active faith. Recognising all of this then, we need see no irresolvable contradiction between Paul and James.

Rather they are making different sorts of points in contrasting yet compatible ways. A question to consider. Reading the work of Paul it seems that he is primarily focused on the question of entry and justification by faith as the fundamental declaration that we are members of the people of God.

A declaration made not on the basis of works, whether works of the flesh or even works of an active faith. When we first come to God we have nothing to show for ourselves. However James' attention seems to be later on in time, not the initial entry, but what happens to true faith as we grow and mature and how God's justification or vindication of us can be according to the practical faithfulness that is the unavoidable outworking of true faith.

How can reading James and Paul together give us a fuller understanding of what faith

and justification mean?