The Psalms; Israel’s Wisdom: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs

In the last lesson we talked about the book of Psalms and how it is a hymnbook of Israel from the second temple period. They range from the entire history of Israel from songs written by Moses to songs written after the return from exile. It is a collection that engages every type of emotion. As Calvin wrote, “The Psalms reflect all parts of the soul.”

In the last lesson we talked about five major types of psalms. We looked in particular at how these different types really can be grouped into two major types: psalms of praise and psalms of lament. There are different types of psalms of praise, particularly those for personal and corporate worship in answer to vows that one has made to God in times of distress. The people would sing a song of lament, either individually or corporately. We have that fluctuation in the Psalms; there are both individual psalms and corporate psalms. If you were to sing a psalm of lament in worship to God, the very form of that psalm includes a vow of praise. It goes something like, “Lord, when You answer this prayer, we will return and tell everyone about Your greatness.” That is the gist of the vow of praise. A thanksgiving psalm is a payment of the vow of praise in the psalm of lament.

The other type of praise psalm is at the coronation of a king. It is in association with these royal psalms and God’s promise to the house of David. This is true both in its current character and the fact that it is an enduring promise and has a future character. Some of those psalms can be characterized as Messianic. We have two main types of psalms of praise: thanksgiving and royal. We also have two main types of psalms of lament. We have penitential psalms and imprecatory psalms.

Wisdom psalms are kind of their own character. We will talk more about them later as we look at the whole issue of types of wisdom. The basic idea of wisdom psalms, for example Psalm 1, is that they celebrate the notion of being in covenant relationship with God and that He initiates His grace to us. He orders the universe in a certain way to where, as you submit to the Lord in wisdom and wise action, He blesses you. There is a sense that the righteous are blessed and the wicked are cursed. There is a sense that the wise are rewarded and they prosper. The foolish do not prosper. That is a particular type of wisdom that we will talk about in just a moment.

There are two dominant types of psalms: praise and lament. Those can be broken down into different types. We have a few examples of a third type of psalm, which are the wisdom psalms. Let us take a few minutes to look together at Psalm 22. This is a psalm that Jesus quotes from the cross, so I think it is probably a mistake to view this as a Messianic psalm. Jesus picks up the words of the righteous sufferer. The righteous sufferer is a very important pattern in the Old Testament. This is in terms of the worshiper who keeps covenant with God, yet things do not go right. One of the key aspects of lament are the two questions, “Why, O Lord?” and “How long, O Lord?” At the very heart of the notion of lament are two things. One is the righteous, loving, and good character of God. The other is the unjust oppressor or circumstances in which the worshiper finds himself.

Another type of lament is a penitential psalm. One can bring grief on oneself by one’s own sins. Psalm 51 is an example of that. Notice the evangelical character of lament and the Gospel shape of lament and prayer in and of itself. One, it is without resource or recourse in and of one’s own self to make the situation different. We read in Psalm 18 the notion of the cords of death encompassed around the psalmist. The worshiper has a sense of being out of control. His or her life is in chaos. It is a sense in which the proper order of things in terms of the moral order of the universe is not working at the present time. This is from one’s own limited human perspective, but we are very finite and cannot see
everything that is going on. One does not go to some other king or god, but he goes to the temple and cries out to the living God, who is good, just, and can change things. We can see in the very nature of lament that this is the way a wise person responds to suffering and injustice. He is to bring his own questions, doubts, anger, frustration, and sense of limitation to the living God. “How long, O Lord?” We read in Psalm 22,

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, and am not silent.
Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the praise of Israel.
In you our fathers put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.
They cried to you and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not disappointed […]

Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you
even at my mother’s breast.
From birth I was cast upon you;
from my mother’s womb you have been my God.
Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.
Roaring lions tearing their prey
open their mouths wide against me.
I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me.
My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.
Dogs have surrounded me […]
But you, O LORD, be not far off;
O my Strength, come quickly to help me.
Deliver my life from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dogs.
Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save me from the horns of the wild oxen.
I will declare your name to my brothers;
in the congregation I will praise you.
You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
For he has not despised or disdained
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help.

That is right at the heart of what lament is all about. There is a sense of appealing to the character of God. It is a notion of confessing faith. It is like they say, “Because of who You are and what You’ve done, we come to You. You are enthroned, our fathers trusted You. You brought them out. You brought me out of the womb.” The psalmist goes on to talk about his enemies. He metaphorically depicts them as bulls. The vow of praise comes near the end in verses 22-44. All of these verbs petition God: save, do not be far off, come quickly. Petition is an important element of lament. “God, do something.” These elements of addressing God, the questions of lament, confessing faith in the steadfast character of God, asking God to act, and avowing praise are a pattern of the elements of lament that we see throughout the Psalms.

Notice how vivid, detailed, and descriptive of emotion the psalmist is. I do not know about your prayer life, but I know in my own prayer life that it is difficult, I think sometimes, for God to take me seriously, because I am so casual in my prayers. Do I really want God to act? How will He know that? I know that God knows everything. But I can pour out my heart to Him and vividly describe what I want. How do you communicate with your spouse when you really want him or her to pay attention to you? The Psalms are full of vivid, detailed arguing of your case before God. That is how we should pray. We should put time into our prayers. Written prayers are so important because we need to reflect on what it is exactly that we need to say to God. We should think through what we want Him to hear from us and what we want Him to do for us. The Psalms give us that. Sometimes they are general, but so often they are very vivid, specific, and descriptive of one’s own heart and emotion before God in worship.

Now let us talk about praise. It is the same sort of thing. Let us look at Psalm 106. I come from a Baptist background, and there is a wonderful hymn based on the psalms of praise. I do not particularly care for the tune now, because it is from the nineteenth century, but it says, “Count your many blessings / Name them one by one / Count your blessings / See what God has done / Count your blessings / Name them one by one.” That is a good song. It is good because it is exactly what we see in Psalm 106.

Let us read a little bit of Psalm 106.

Praise the LORD.
Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.
his love endures forever.
Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the LORD
or fully declare his praise? [The psalmist is about to do just that! He is about to recount the mighty acts of the Lord.]
Blessed are they who maintain justice
who constantly do what is right.
Remember me, O LORD, when you show favor to your people.
come to my aid when you save them […]

We have sinned, even as our fathers did;
we have done wrong and acted wickedly.
When our fathers were in Egypt,
they gave no thought to your miracles;
they did not remember your many kindnesses,
and they rebelled by the Red Sea.
Yet he saved them for his name’s sake,
to make his mighty power known.
He rebuked the Red Sea, and it dried up:
  he led them through the depths as through a desert. […]
He saved them from the hand of the foe;
  from the hand of the enemy.
The waters covered their adversaries;
  not one of them survived.
Then they believed his promises
  and sang his praise.

But they soon forgot what he had done
  and did not wait for his counsel.
In the desert they gave in to their craving;
  in the wasteland they put God to the test.
So he gave them what they asked for,
  but sent a wasting disease upon them.

In the camp they grew envious of Moses […]
The earth opened up and swallowed Dathan. […]

At Horeb they made a calf
  and worshiped an idol cast from metal.
They exchanged their Glory
  for an image of a bull, which eats grass.
They forgot the God who saved them,
  who had done great things in Egypt,
miracles in the land of Ham
  and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. […]

Save us, O LORD our God,
  and gather us from the nations,
that we may give thanks to your holy name
  and glory in your praise.

Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel,
  from everlasting to everlasting.
Let all the people say, “Amen!”

Praise the LORD.

I probably would have just mentioned the Red Sea one time, but the psalmist just keeps talking about the Red Sea. He goes on for three different stanzas here. We have seven verses or stanzas on the Red Sea account. It just goes on and on, and time after time the psalmist recounts rebellion against the Lord and the Lord’s deliverance and mercy. In Psalms 78, 106, and others we have episode after episode of recounting and description upon description of God’s righteousness, mercy, patience, and deliverance of
His people. This is a praising of God’s attributes of righteousness and faithfulness. Those psalms that just talk about the attributes actually have stories behind them. They are just shorthand for all of the family photos and episodes of God’s faithfulness. We know God is faithful and righteous because time and time again He has acted in a faithful way. He has done righteous deeds, and He has delivered us in history.

The eminence of God and His actions in history on behalf of His people are recounted in praise to God time and again. That does something to our hearts. Both in lament and in praise it shapes our identity, character, and affections. “This is our God!” When we just do the shorthand and take the shortcuts, always saying summary references to God, something happens to us. We begin to forget what faithfulness and righteousness mean. We forget the family stories, and our hearts and worship get smaller. They begin to shrink. These elaborate praises and petitions in praise and lament give us in our hymnbook and prayer book tremendous guidance on how to worship God. They guide us in how to pray and praise the God who loves us and with whom we are in covenant relationship.

A good memory verse for the Psalms is Psalm 95, “Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; / Let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation. / Let us come before him with thanksgiving / and extol him with music and song. / For the LORD is the great God, / the great King above all gods.” That is a wonderful way to summarize the Psalms.

Let us look at Israel’s wisdom. We have already begun to talk a little bit about wisdom. There are two different kinds of wisdom literature: didactic and discursive. Didactic wisdom is very much like Proverbs. It is made of pithy, proverbial observations about the general course of life. It is generally optimistic and suited for children or young adults. It contrasts righteousness and wickedness, wisdom and folly. Wisdom is gained through experience and paying attention to how things work in life. Discursive wisdom is made of prosaic, nuanced questions about the meaning of life in the face of suffering or death. It is generally pessimistic. The focus is on the limits of human life and wisdom. It is suited for mature adults, and it questions the contrast between the righteous and the wicked. We have examples of both of these kinds of wisdom in the wisdom literature of Israel.

Most of the wisdom literature is poetic in its genre. It has meter and parallelism. We can see different parallel structures in the stanzas. There are synthetic, antithetic, and synonymous parallel structures. Turn to Proverbs 9 to look at the synonymous parallelism of Hebrew poetry. Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the LORD is the / beginning of wisdom / and knowledge of the Holy One / is understanding.” You can see the two stanzas that the fear of the Lord is synonymous with the Holy One, and wisdom and understanding are synonymous. In Proverbs 10:4 we have an example of antithetical parallelism, “Lazy hands make a man poor, / but diligent hands bring wealth.” You can hear that the lazy and the poor and diligence and wealth are being contrasted. In Ecclesiastes 11:1 we have an example of synthetic parallelism. “Cast your bread upon the waters, / for after many days you will find it again.” Instead of an A-A, B-B, or A to B, B to C scenario, we have an A plus B gives C. A third thing happens in the way the parallelism works. These are types of poetic parallelism.

We also have other literary structures like acrostics in Psalm 119 and Proverbs 31. Remember that they were in an oral culture, so there are different ways in which the poetry is structured for memory. When you have long poetic structures like Psalm 119, you need a superstructure or architecture to build these different sections on. Every letter of the alphabet is there in the acrostic. Job is framed by a story, and we have elements of a story in the Song of Songs. We will talk about that in a moment.
There is an association of wisdom with Solomon. First Kings 4 tells us that Solomon wrote thousands of proverbs and psalms. We have other collections appended to the Proverbs, but Solomon stands as the fountainhead of Israelite wisdom. We see in the beginning of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs notations that may relate to Solomon in some way. They do not necessarily mean that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, but they certainly draw upon Solomonic wisdom traditions. Ecclesiastes is anonymous, done by the so-called teacher. Song of Songs could be for, about, or to Solomon.

What we see in Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes is in keeping with other wisdom traditions in the ancient Near East. From Babylon we have a dialogue about human misery that is very similar to the dialogues that we have in Job between Job and his friends. There is a dispute over suicide in Egypt, which is similar to dynamics that we see in Job. In Proverbs 22 and 23 we see very close similarities to Egyptian wisdom sayings from the teachings of Amenemope.

There are also things that are very distinct about Israelite wisdom. What we see with Israelite wisdom is that wisdom is supremely moral, relational, and practical. *Hokema* is the Hebrew word for wisdom. *Hokema* is about skill, life, and relationships, and that is the character of all wisdom traditions that have to do with observations of life. These are proverbial sayings like what one might see with regard to hard work and wealth. Many cultures would observe that relationship. It might also be about honesty and living in safety, for example. We see in Israel that all of wisdom is put on the basis of a relationship to God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The foundation, starting place, and measure of wisdom has to do with covenantal relationship with Yahweh. He not only is the Redeemer of Israel, but He is the One who made everything. In another aspect of the character of wisdom, for example Proverbs 8, we see that wisdom is with God from the beginning when He lays the foundations of the earth. The foundations of the universe are laid in keeping with wisdom. The way in which the seasons and relationships work have not only a material character to them but also a moral character to them. One can understand the limitations of one’s own body, the elements of sickness, and how distrust, speaking ill of others, and lying about them creates a break in a relationship. As a result, one is wise to recognize these things and begin to live in accord with the material and moral structure of the universe. Proverbs underscores the supreme value of wisdom for all aspects of living, contrasting wisdom with folly in terms of life skills and also the way of righteousness.

Let us talk about the wise and the foolish. The fool does not necessarily have to do with a lack of intelligence. There is another word for that, which is “simple.” That has to do with being naïve. They are the uninitiated. The fool is not necessarily unintelligent; the fool may be very intelligent. The fool is immoral and the one who does not receive counsel. He does his own thing, is rebellious, and is overly independent. He is autonomous and seeks autonomy. Being a fool has to do with moral character.

Look at Proverbs 1, where we see in the first seven verses a table of contents for the whole collection of Proverbs. “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young—let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.” Here we have several different types of words. Discipline and prudence have to do with life skill. Righteousness, justice, and fairness have to do with moral character. These things are all involved with aspects of wisdom. Notice that wisdom not only requires life experience, according to Solomon, but it also requires instruction. In the Proverbs we have a book of instruction, primarily for the young. Proverbs provides a reliable resource to teach wisdom to form the
character and virtuous practices of young members of the royal court and within the households of Israel.

We see Solomon is the teacher in the beginning of Proverbs. At the very end we have instruction from a mother for her son who is a prince. We have the instruction to King Lemuel from his mother in Proverbs 31. The setting is clearly the royal court and the kind of character and wisdom it takes to run a society and a country. As you go through in Proverbs 1 through 9, the predominate pattern is of a father and mother instructing their children. It might be father to son or father and mother to son and daughter. The royal court instruction takes place, but it is the kind of instruction that should also take place in the household.

Notice the listing of benefits and warnings against folly. There is supremacy and supreme value in wisdom. If you look in Proverbs 4 and 5, two pathways are laid out for a young man by his father. Again, it looks at transgenerational instruction. The father teaches what he was taught by his own father. Proverbs 4:3-11 says,

> When I was a boy in my father’s house, still tender, and only a child of my mother, he taught me and said, “Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live. Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or swerve from them. Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it costs all you have, get understanding. Esteem her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you. She will set a garland of grace on your head and present you with a crown of splendor.” Listen, my son, accept what I say, and the years of your life will be many. I guide you in the way of wisdom and lead you along straight paths.

Here we have the way of wisdom, the path of righteousness, and the supreme value of wisdom in relation to everything. We see it in relation to wealth, one’s own sexuality, and one’s reputation. Wisdom will enhance all of these things and one’s own life experience of these things. It is interesting that we have a personification of wisdom that is hinted at in Proverbs 4, and it goes to full bloom in Proverbs 8. In Proverbs 5 we have a contrast. There is the way of wisdom and the path of righteousness. Wisdom is a woman who calls out to listen to her instruction. Then we have the adulteress or prostitute, who is the way to death. Proverbs 5:3 says,

> For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave.
She gives no thought to the way of Life; her paths are crooked, but she knows it not.

Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say. Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house, lest you give your best strength to others and your years to one who is cruel, lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich another man’s house. At the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and your body are spent. You will say, “How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction!”

We see in the depiction of the benefits of wisdom and the warning against the adulteress that in the Israelite view of wisdom, life is one fabric. All the threads of life run together in the one fabric. One’s own economics, sexuality, and family relationships are either held together by wisdom or ripped by folly. You give your wealth to the house of another when you have sex with someone who is not your wife. If you have children through that illicit relationship, you have to support these children. People come after you. All of life is a fabric that is woven together in terms of wisdom or ripped in terms of folly.

Let us go over the outline of the Proverbs. There is emphasis in Proverbs 1 through 9 on the father’s instruction of his son, establishing the supreme value of wisdom that is rooted in a heart that is centered in covenant relationship with Yahweh and the fear of the Lord. All of life is lived coram deo, or before the face of God, as we would say in the Reformed tradition. That is the sense of what we have in the Proverbs. The fear and reverence of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We have the collection of Solomon’s wisdom that begins in Proverbs 10. Solomon’s wisdom collected in Hezekiah’s court begins in Proverbs 25. You can see the way that the proverbs are stitched together. Hezekiah is in Solomon’s family and David’s family. Proverbs 25:1 says, “These are more proverbs of Solomon copied by the men of Hezekiah, King of Judah.”

It is interesting that we have a collection of anonymous wisdom in Proverbs 22 through 24. This raises a good example of the character of wisdom. Proverbs 22:17 says, “Pay attention and listen to the / sayings of the wise; / apply your heart to what I teach…” That goes through Proverbs 24:34. Many of the sayings here are very similar to the teachings of Amenemope. What we have in the wisdom literature is a good example of the intersection of general and special revelation. Sometimes we think of special revelation as the Scriptures, while general revelation is nature and other expressions of truth. In the wisdom literature we have the willingness of Scripture to gather wisdom from other cultures and put it within special revelation. This is proof positive that Schaeffer was right. “All truth is God’s truth.” God is the creator of all things, so life works a certain way because God made the limits of life the same for everyone. Everyone needs to eat, and everyone dies. All people want to provide for their children, themselves, and their family. Everyone wants to live in safety so that they do not have to worry about being robbed by a neighbor. These are things that are transcultural. In the wisdom literature we have the intersection of general and special revelation. It is a vivid example of that in these collections of the wise.
We have already spoken about how the Proverbs end in chapter 31 with the instruction for a king and how he should rule. He should not become drunk, and he should choose a wife of noble character who is industrious. She should buy and sell property, provide for the poor, and be someone he can rely on. She should be able to speak words of wisdom to him. She not only speaks with wisdom but is clothed with wisdom and strength. The king wants to marry a woman like the kind of person he wants to be. The beginning and ending of the Proverbs is a good framing for the fact that Proverbs is about the formation of character. It is about the formation of the identity of the people of God and its leaders in the home and society. Proverbs 1:7, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge but fools despise wisdom and discipline,” is a very appropriate memory verse for the Proverbs.

Let me say a little bit about some wisdom psalms. We have good examples of didactic wisdom in Psalm 1. We have already talked about the contrast of the righteous and the wicked, the wise and the foolish. Psalms 49 and 73 approach issues of discursive wisdom. Remember in Psalm 73 we have someone who comes in with a question about the prosperity of the wicked. Psalm 73:3 says,

For I envied the arrogant
    when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
They have no struggles;
    their bodies are healthy and strong.
They are free from the burdens common to man;
    they are not plagued by human ills.
Therefore pride is their necklace;
    they clothe themselves with violence.
From their callous hearts comes iniquity;
    the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.
They scoff, and speak with malice; […]
They say, “How can God know?
    Does the Most High have knowledge?”
This is what the wicked are like—
    always carefree, they increase in wealth.

That goes against the notion of proverbial or conventional wisdom. In how they use their wealth, power, and tongues, they violate wisdom. Then he says, “…till I entered the sanctuary of God; / then I understood their final destiny. / Surely you place them on slippery ground; / you cast them down to ruin. 
How suddenly are they destroyed, / completely swept away by terrors! / As a dream when one awakes, / so when you arise, O LORD, / you will despise them as fantasies.” We have an example in Psalm 73 of discursive wisdom.

Some have raised an exception in Psalm 88. Most of the lament psalms end on a positive note and with a vow of praise. They make a petition to God to save and deliver, and when He saves and delivers, they praise Him. As you might recall, Psalm 88 ends by saying, “Darkness is my closest friend.” There is no positive beat at the end of Psalm 88. It is a very dark psalm; it is a psalm of depression. It is a very honest psalm in a situation where one has not been able at that particular moment to speak about a hopeful future. He speaks honestly about the present, and the present has closed in on the psalmist. Verses 15 and following say, “From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death; / I have suffered your terrors and am in despair. / Your wrath has swept over me; / your terrors have destroyed me. / All day long they surround me like a flood; / they have completely engulfed me. / You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; / the darkness is my closest friend.” What is extraordinary about this psalm is that there is still an element of hope in that the psalmist talks to God. He keeps talking to
God through his tears and in his numbness. Verse 9 says, “I call to you, O LORD, every day; / I spread out my hands to you.” In the limitations of his life, which seem so severe, unjust, and unfair, all he can do is keep praying. All he can do is keep crying out to God and talking to Him. He does not turn to Baal or other gods but remains faithful to His God even in the darkness. Our tendency, for those of us who are American in particular, is to want to have a happy ending to the story. Sometimes it is very inappropriate to introduce happy endings in the anguish of loss and grief. That is part of what Job’s friends tried to do. They tried to speed the story up and save the reputation of God. In their own limited understanding of the universe, they tried to solve all the problems that seemed apparent in this particular moment, place, and circumstance. At the extremities of life, on the margins of life, and in extreme injustice and loss, one should not try to solve those things. One should voice one’s own questions, agonies, anguish, and sense of limits to God.

We need to talk about Job before we finish this lesson. The events of Job are set in a period that reflects the patriarchal timeframe. Job leads a semi-nomadic life. He talks about making sacrifices for his children, which means there is no priesthood. The names of the raiders are Sabean and Chaldean. Chaldean is an old name for the Babylonians. Job is depicted as a great patriarch. The names of places are Uz, to the east, near the desert, and Edom. All of these aspects indicate a timeframe of the events happening in the patriarchal period. The author or authors of Job are unknown.

The book of Job is a tool for teaching students of wisdom. Job’s friends represent other cultures and wisdom traditions that are brought around the circle of Job’s experience to respond to his situation. In the second half of the book of Job, Elihu is a representative of the prophetic tradition of wisdom. Initially we have grey-hairs with much life experience gathering around Job and expressing different proverbial types of wisdom to try to address his situation. We find out Elihu has been there in the circle of friends the whole time but keeps his peace. He is a young man who sees visions and dreams. Wisdom for Elihu is not gained over life experience, but wisdom is revealed from God. This represents the prophetic tradition of wisdom, which is a different type of wisdom. Job’s situation is used over and over again and even updated to teach and train wisdom students about what it means to be a wise person at the extremities of life.

A lot of times the book of Job is looked at as a theodicy to answer the question, “How can God be righteous in the face of such evil?” I do not think that is what the book of Job is about. It does not seek to answer, “Why do the righteous suffer?” We do not get an answer to that. “What is the character of evil and Satan?” We get some information about that, though Satan only appears at the beginning of the story. “What is the value of suffering in wisdom and faith?” These are some of the questions that are often put to the book of Job, but I am not sure they are questions that the book of Job asks. I think the primary questions that the book of Job asks are, “How does a wise person respond to God in suffering? How does a wise person respond to others who are suffering? What are the limits of human wisdom?” In other words, the book of Job is for wisdom students emphasizing the limits and borders of human wisdom. There are questions we cannot answer because we are finite. We are not in a position to answer them. Yet wisdom is the endeavor of life, as Ecclesiastes says. It is so valuable. It is just that it is limited. “How does a wise person respond to God in suffering, and how does a wise person suffer with others?” I think those are the primary questions that the book of Job addresses.

The purpose of Job is to explore the limits and proper use of human wisdom in the case of a righteous individual’s suffering to respond wisely to God and to people who suffer. That is a good description of the purpose of Job. At the beginning and the end we have a narrative framework for the book. The prologue is about the conflict in heaven between God and Satan, and the epilogue is about the rebuke of friends and the blessing and mediation of Job for his friends. Then we have a set of dialogues. You can
see the parallel structure with the prologue and epilogue and the two types of dialogues. The dialogues between Job and his friends make up a massive section from Job 3 through 27. Then there is the monologue of conflict between Job and the Lord where Elihu first intervenes. Right in the middle in Job 28 we have a reflection on true wisdom. This is the turning point of the book.

Let us talk about what we are meant to get from these dialogues. A lot of you probably felt like the dialogues would never end. It seems like they say the same thing over and over again. That is the point! Job’s friends go on and on and on ad nauseum! Wisdom students were supposed to feel exactly the way you feel. “This is getting us absolutely nowhere. We are just running in place and covering the same ground. We have not advanced whatsoever.” That is what you are supposed to get. The dialogues in Job 3 through 27 just go back and forth. We see something crucial happening with Job, though. That is that Job’s wisdom deepens. In the first couple of chapters, Job responds to the severe events by saying a proverb. Proverbs will not be enough in this sort of situation, though. Job responds with a cliché and a proverb. Proverbs are great for the center of life, and they are very necessary, helpful, and truthful for life in the mainstream. When things click along the way they are supposed to click along, the Proverbs are helpful. But proverbs are very unhelpful and insufficient at the margins and extremities of life. We see that Job goes from a proverb to a rebuke to his wife about cursing God, and then in Job 3 he screams in pain. Finally we start to get somewhere. That is exactly what any emotionally healthy person would do in his situation. The book of Job is not a book that the stoics would like. We see that when Job begins to scream and cry out in pain he begins to deal with life as it comes to him. We begin to see that finally in Job 10 Job begins to talk to God about these things. As he begins to talk to God and question Him, he begins to lament these things.

It is interesting that we hear Job’s friends talk to him until we are sick to death of hearing their voices. But never once did Job’s friends talk to God on behalf of Job. They did not pray one single time. They talked to Job a lot about God, but they never once prayed for him. That is a great temptation for us as preachers and pastors. We are tempted to talk to people about God a lot. In this situation we should listen and talk to God about people more than we talk to people about God. We do not have the answers. We are right here with the sufferer, on the earthly side of the line. We are not above it, and we do not have answers. We can ask questions with them, and we can point to the One they should be asking their questions to. That is what Job 28 is all about. Only God knows the way to wisdom. We are like those ancient Near Eastern miners who just drill holes in the dark. We do not have sonar or anything else. We just drill down without finding anything after days and days of seeking. We drill somewhere else hoping to find some gold. Once we find it, it is worth it. The search for wisdom is appropriate, but we must understand that only God knows the way to wisdom.

Let me say one more thing about Job before we end this lesson. At the end of the book of Job he wants to bring God into court. Job wants to bring God into court, because he feels like there has been some sort of charge against him in court. He wants the court to dismiss the charge as false. There is a notion that Satan has the beginning of cursing God to His face. This is a theme throughout the book, because we see that Job wants to speak to God to His face. He does not want to curse God, but the idea of speaking to God’s face is prevalent. Job begins to think of himself in ways that bring question on God’s righteousness in terms of talking about his own righteous behavior. He then brings question on God’s righteous behavior. We see the case where Elihu intervenes. Job never gets any answers. God never answers his question or gives him access to what happened in heaven. He never knows the whole story. The only answer Job gets is the presence of God Himself. The Lord is under absolutely no obligation to submit to Job’s summons. Yet the Lord graciously comes to Job and begins to cross-examine him in chapters 38 and 41. He does it on the basis of taking Job to the different corners or limits of the earth. He takes Job to the stars, the rivers, and the oceans. He asks, “Where were you?” Job was in the box, not
above it. The instruction that we see from God’s cross-examination of Job is the limits of human wisdom. God shows Job the limits of human wisdom. Instead of the charge against Job being dropped, Job withdraws his charge of wanting God to be brought into court. He puts his hand over his mouth. The Lord restores Job, and Job must act as a priest on behalf of his friends at the end of the story.