

Wisdom Poems

Proverbs 1 - 9, Ecclesiastes

The poems (and the prose speculations of Ecclesiastes) are a different form of wisdom teaching from the short proverbs. They are grouped together by themes: those in Proverbs are mainly on the excellence of wisdom, those in Ecclesiastes on the futility of life. Although both books claim Solomon as their author, they are probably compilations from many different sources.

The wisdom literature deals with the tensions of life. We think of life as meaningful but cannot quite grasp what the meaning is. Proverbs presents the optimistic view: if we pursue wisdom we will have a far clearer idea of life's meaning and live in peace and prosperity. Ecclesiastes is more pessimistic: we will never be able fully to comprehend the world, and no amount of wisdom will prevent us eventually dying and leaving it to others.

The foundation on which modern western culture is built is the wisdom tradition of the ancient Greeks, in which the aim of philosophy was to find a point of neutrality outside the world from which to examine it, imposing an objective framework on all human experience and thereby bringing it under the control of those who have the right kind of knowledge. The wisdom tradition of Israel is quite different. It is practical rather than theoretical. It does not attempt to escape from the world of experience, but works from within. It does not seek universal, objective answers, but rules of conduct. The key is to know God, fear him and follow him.

Day 228. Psalm 37:1-17; Proverbs 1 - 3

In Praise of Wisdom

Psalm 37:1-17

A wisdom psalm written for private instruction. Each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, making the psalm easier to

memorise. It encourages the reader to avoid the temptations brought on by the vagaries of life and hold resolutely to the fear of the Lord.

Proverbs 1

Hebrew wisdom is always practical rather than theoretical. Its result is a disciplined and prudent life, knowledge of what is just, right and fair (1:3). Above all, wisdom rests on the fear of the Lord (1:7). Without him there can be no wisdom; so the fear of the Lord is the key to all the blessings wisdom brings.

Wisdom is better than ill-gotten gains (1:8-19). In our society, the temptations to get rich through cheating others are more subtle than those of the band of robbers pictured here. Much of our industry relies on persuading people to buy things they don't really need. As a result most people have to work harder than is good for them to be able to afford it. A few get extremely wealthy, while the rest are condemned to a life of toil and anxiety.

Proverbs 2

Wisdom comes from the Lord, who protects those who search for it (2:5-8). By it, we can avoid the snares of wicked men and loose women (2:12-19).

Proverbs 3

Wisdom is the key to "shalom" (translated "prosperity", "peace" or "welfare" in 3:2). A series of couplets list the requirements of wisdom and the rewards they lead to. Love and faithfulness lead to a good name and favour with others (3:3-4); trust in the Lord rather than ourselves leads to sure guidance (3:5-6); avoiding evil leads to good health (3:7-8); remembering that riches come from God by sacrifice will lead to material well-being (3:9-10); accepting the Lord's discipline leads to closer relationship with him (3:11-12).

3:13-20 provide a hint that what the Old Testament knows as "wisdom" Christians see revealed in Jesus.

Day 229. Psalm 37:18-end; Proverbs 4 - 6

The Way of Wisdom

Psalm 37:18-end

Two ways of life. Those who trust in the Lord give generously, have peace of heart and are protected by him. Those who do not trust him have nothing to rely on when disasters come.

Proverbs 4

Much of the wisdom literature takes the form of advice from a father to his children. This reflects the importance of family life to the health and well-being of society. Israelites were commanded to honour and respect their parents (Deuteronomy 5:16) and parents to pass on the law to their children (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). Christian parents are also instructed to bring up their children in the Lord's discipline and instruction (Ephesians 6:4). A child who is firmly grounded in right teaching and learns the right values and priorities in life when young will tend to follow them when he or she grows up.

4:10-19 compare the two ways, the path of the wicked and that of the righteous, the one a way of death, the other a way of life. The path of the wicked is narrow and strewn with obstacles because wrong choices and values imprison people in a false view of life and narrow down their options in every human relationship. The path of righteousness leads to the brightness of full day, providing a wealth of resources with which to confront every situation (4:18). That is why in every circumstance the most important thing is to guard one's heart (4:23), to keep watch over our values and priorities in life.

Proverbs 5

A warning against sexual temptation. Because it is so strong, prostitution, the world's oldest profession, is an ever-present snare for those who want to live wisely. To give way to sexual temptation means dissipating the energies which should be harnessed and directed toward wisely chosen goals and undermines one's capacity for fidelity in every personal and business relationship (5:9-12). A man's relationship with his wife, which

should be a source of strength and refreshment, becomes a source of tension and a place of disappointment and dishonesty.

Proverbs 6

Warnings against various kinds of folly. To stake your property on the ability of someone to pull themselves out of debt is foolishness. Laziness leads inevitably to poverty. Pride, selfishness and lying spread dissension and misery. Adultery leads to disgrace.

Day 230. Psalm 104; Proverbs 7 - 9

The Wisdom of Creation

Psalm 104

The wisdom of God in creation (104:24). The writer meditates on the days of creation as set out in Genesis 1. Light is God's cloak, the heavens like a roof, while the earth rests securely on its foundations (104:2-5). The division of the waters and the dry land on the third day creates an echo of God's victory over the rebellious sea in the ancient creation story. Not only has God conquered the waters (104:7-9), but he has put them to good use, making the earth fertile to provide food for both animals and mankind (104:10-18). The fourth day brings in the sun and moon to mark times and seasons (Genesis 1:14). The wild animals have their time for hunting, while human beings have their time for work (104:19-23). While the animals seek their food from God, work is the calling God gives to us both in creation and because of sin (Genesis 2:15; 3:17-19).

Not only did God create the world, but he also lovingly sustains it. He is the author of life, and to know him is to know his works more deeply.

Proverbs 7

Here and in chapter 9, the writer urges young men to take wisdom as their companion rather than immoral women. These early chapters of Proverbs have a very pronounced male orientation, reflecting the character of the society in which they were written, where women tended to stay at home and it was largely men who were active in public business. In our own society, where the roles of women and men are more interchangeable, women meet many of the same temptations and have the same need of divine wisdom to guide them.

Proverbs 8

The created world embodies the wisdom of God. Since this is so, the writer sees wisdom as the first of God's creations, perpetually at his side (8:22-31). It is because wisdom is the principle underlying all creation that through wisdom we find the blessings of God (8:32-end). The fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom (9:10) is a matter of attitude and speech (8:13), a whole way of being in the world.

Although the intention of 8:22-30 is simply to extol the place of wisdom in creation, there is a hint of Wisdom as a separate person, embodying an attribute of God. The theologians of the early Church saw in this a reflection of Jesus, the "Word" who was both God and with God, the one by whom all things were made and the light of humankind (John 1:1-4). For Christians, divine wisdom is personified in Jesus, who is the source of all our wisdom and the person through whom we come to know God (1 Corinthians 1:24; Colossians 2:2-3).

Proverbs 9

The invitations of Wisdom and Folly.

Day 231. Psalm 127; Ecclesiastes 1 - 4

The Vanity of Toil

Psalm 127

Success in life does not depend on working harder than others but on God's blessing.

Ecclesiastes 1 - 2

In the story of mankind's first sin, God's judgement on the man was to turn work, which should have been a pleasant and creative occupation (Genesis 2:15), into backbreaking toil. Instead of abundance, with plenty to eat from the garden, there would now be scarcity, constant anxiety about having enough and hard labour to achieve it (Genesis 3:17-19). The judgement on work as a result of sin affects both personal experience and wider economic relationships, since scarcity leads to anxiety, desire and competition. The observations of "the Teacher", recorded in Ecclesiastes make depressing reading, but reflect the futility of life because of our broken relationship with God and the loss of his blessing.

Work is labour and toil with no permanent achievement (1:3). Instead of progress, everything goes in cycles; the achievement of one generation is squandered or ignored by the next (1:4-11). Wisdom cannot do anything to change this, because it is the condition of mankind (1:12-end).

Pleasure is equally meaningless. Idleness and luxury do not lead to happiness. Selfishness and using others for one's own ends makes good relationships impossible (2:1-11). Death puts an end to achievement for both wise and foolish (2:12-23). The only answer is to submit to God and his ordering of the world and find what satisfaction we can in our work (2:24-end).

Ecclesiastes 3

Meditations on Time. Instead of chasing the clock and trying to fill up every minute of our time, a better way of living is to discern the right moment or opportunity for everything, choosing the activity which suits the time (3:1-8). Time is not ours to govern; we live against a background of eternity in which we can see neither the beginning nor the end (3:11). Past,

present and future are under God's eyes, not ours (3:15). Judgement on the lives of others waits its time (3:16-17). The end of all is death, the great unknown (3:18-21).

Ecclesiastes 4

The curse on work takes its toll on economic relationships. It leads to oppression (4:1-3), envy (4:4), laziness on the one hand, anxious overwork on the other (4:5-6). Partnership with others gives far more satisfaction than work for oneself alone (4:7-12). Worldly status means nothing for the good of one's work (4:13-end).

Day 232. Psalm 49; Ecclesiastes 5 - 8

The Vanity of Life

Psalm 49

The vanity of trusting in wealth.

Ecclesiastes 5 - 6

It is important not to try to use God. It is better to listen and think about him than to say many rash words, especially to make rash promises of commitment, which you soon realise you can't keep (5:1-7).

The pursuit of wealth as a means of happiness and contentment is likely to fail, since the economic system is unjust and unpredictable. Those who deserve wealth are no more likely to end up with it than those who don't (5:8-9,11,13-14). The value of wealth is the security and contentment it brings, so if you can't actually enjoy it, what use is it (5:10,16-17; 6:1-2). Prosperity and long life were traditionally the signs of God's blessing, but they bring no happiness if the man who has them cannot enjoy them (6:3-6). The most important thing in life is to be able to enjoy our daily work and our possessions, whether they be few or many. That way we both live in contentment and also give honour to the God who gives them (5:18-end).

Ecclesiastes 7

Wisdom is supremely valuable, but fragile; it may be lost or corrupted (7:7,11-12). True wisdom will look at life from the perspective of death (7:1-4). It will not get easily excited or angry about new things (7:8-9) or yearn for the passing of the old (7:10), but have a sober judgment about everything (7:3-4).

True wisdom requires us to acknowledge our shadow side. To pursue wisdom and righteousness is good, but to strive for perfection can often mean running away from the evil we know in ourselves (7:15-18,20). If we set store by our own goodness, we can easily be disappointed (7:21-22). Wisdom itself has limits, so it is wise not to trust wisdom too much (7:23-25).

Ecclesiastes 8

Political idealism is often disappointed. If you want to redress wrongs, find out the proper procedures and wait for the right time to use them (8:2-6). Don't be too worried when the wicked appear to get away with their crimes; the political system is bound to be imperfect (8:7-13). It is better to be content with your own life (8:14-15).

Day 233. Psalm 119:1-24; Ecclesiastes 9 - 12

The End of the Matter

Psalm 119:1-24

The way to happiness and contentment is to live according to God's laws.

Ecclesiastes 9

An optimistic view of death is so widespread today that the words of 9:1-6 should make us pause to think. The teacher did not expect the next life to be a joyful one in which everyone will be happy in the company of all the people they have loved here on earth. His image of death was an empty existence, in which there would be no desires to stimulate action, no affection in friendships, no hopes, no achievements and no memories. Nor was there anything better for the good, the rich or the important. All came to the same end, existence without life.

With no hope of eternal life to moderate this gloomy prospect, the teacher's advice is to enjoy the life we have while we have it. We should do our best to find joy in the three things which God gave to the first man and woman at creation: food and drink, work and companionship (9:7-10; Genesis 2:9,10,15,18,22). The problem with this advice is that human sin makes it difficult to follow and for some impossible. There is not enough food to go round, work is a source of frustration as well as satisfaction, and relationships fraught with misunderstanding. We need God's work of salvation before these things can become satisfying again, and even this is not complete for us until we enter the life of heaven.

Ecclesiastes 10:1 - 11:6

A well-ordered society is one in which quality of character is reflected in social standing, but all too often this is not the case (10:5-7,16-17). Success requires diligence (10:18), risk-taking (10:8-9), skill (10:10) and wisdom (10:1,12). To trust life and invest in it by working hard will bring rewards (11:1-6).

Ecclesiastes 11:7 - 12:8

Make use of the energy and vitality of youth (11:7-end), since old age signals the approach of death. The weather grows wintry (12:2), arms and

legs grow weak, teeth fall out and eyes grow dim (12:3), deafness comes on and sounds grow indistinct (12:4), weakness leads to nervousness, the hair grows white and sexual desire fails (12:5). The light in the house fails, the water supply ceases (12:6), the body returns to dust and the spirit to God (12:7). The professional mourners get ready for their task and the man goes to the home from which he will not emerge again (12:5). If we do not know what lies beyond death, life itself is meaningless (12:8).

Ecclesiastes 12:9-end.

No one can stand outside experience and discover "the beginning from the end" (3:11), however hard the writers of books may try (12:12). The only wisdom we can have is from within experience and all boils down to this: fear God and keep his commands. On this basis we all will come to judgement.

Job

Job is a puzzling book. Superficially, it is a collection of poems around the subject of the suffering of the righteous or the apparent injustice of life. But beneath this theme runs a deeper one: the question, can human beings be righteous before God at all?

The poems are based on the story of Job, the servant of God, whose loyalty was tested by suffering, who passed the test and was finally rewarded. But while the story itself is quite clear cut in its explanation for Job's suffering, the poems explore Job's experience from the *inside* and show that the pat answers given by his friends to explain his suffering are inadequate and insensitive.

In the exchanges between Job and his three friends there are three clear "cycles" (chapters 4-27), although the end of the third cycle appears to have been lost or become very mutilated (chapters 25-27). Then follows a magnificent poem on the subject of wisdom (chapter 28) which, although it is given to Job in the dialogue could, and probably originally did, stand perfectly well by itself. After that comes a further picture of Job's wretched state (chapters 29-31). Elihu's speech which follows (chapters 32-37) is puzzling, as it does not seem to add much to what has gone before, and the poetry is not as good as the other speeches. Finally, the enigmatic speech of God (chapters 38-41) and Job's repentance in 42:1-6 bring the poems to a climax.

The compiler has added an introduction and conclusion in narrative style which explains the context of the poems by briefly retelling the original story. Unlike the poetry, however, the narrative gives the reader a clear reason for Job's sufferings. Part of the dramatic tension is due to the fact that we, the readers, know why Job is suffering but he and his friends do not.

Day 234. Psalm 88; Job 1 - 3

A Righteous Man Suffers

Psalm 88

The writer cries out to God in despair. Perhaps he is suffering from a disease which meant being set apart from the community. He has lost his friends, to whom he has become repulsive (88:8). He has even lost his family and loved ones (88:18). They have given him up and count him as dead (88:3-5). He himself is afraid of death (88:6-7) and prays to God to save him from it (88:1-2,9-14).

Job 1-2

The story teller presents Job as a man of outstanding piety - he even presents sacrifices in case his children have sinned - with the great wealth which most Jews would expect to go with his piety. But Job has an enemy, the "satan" or "adversary". Although Satan is an enemy of mankind, he is a servant of God and a member of the divine council. His accusation is that Job is only righteous in his own interest, because he expects a reward (1:9). Already, the link between wealth and righteousness is subtly called into question. Satan is allowed to test Job *on God's behalf* and under his control (1:12; 2:3,6). Twice in the introduction God calls Job "my servant" (1:8; 2:3). It is *because* he is God's servant that Job is put to the test, in order to glorify God by showing that he really does serve God for God's sake alone and not for his own reward. God's servants today often suffer the same kind of testing as Job and like Job's their sufferings are frequently misunderstood by pious people with simplistic beliefs in divine rewards.

Job 3

The scene is set for the poems. All meaning and purpose to life seem to have disappeared and Job gives way to despair (3:1-10). There is a difference between natural optimism and genuine faith in God. Sometimes our faith in the natural goodness of the world may have to be shattered in order to bring us to a deeper trust in God.

In his despair, Job pictures Sheol or the grave as a place of rest, where the troubles of the world will be over (3:11-19; compare with Ecclesiastes 9:1-6). He longs for death as an end to his sufferings. His piety has finally given way and now he sees God as his enemy, hiding himself and giving Job no explanation for the sudden change in his fortunes (3:23). But what has happened is that the insecure foundations of his piety have been exposed. His present suffering is just what he feared (3:25). Instead of trusting in sacrifices and moral goodness to keep him from hard times he should have been trusting in the Lord, and this is what he will learn in the course of his trials.

Day 235. Psalm 39; Job 4 - 7

Responding to Suffering

Psalm 39

The writer struggles to control his emotions but finds the effort too great. The discipline of the Lord seems unbearable.

Job 4 - 5

When they first came to visit him, Job's three friends sat in silence with him for a week (2:13). One of the best ways to support someone in suffering is simply to be with them. Unfortunately, as soon as the friends begin to open their mouths, they put their feet in them! At the beginning of the poetry they are not unsympathetic to Job, but they simply do not understand what he is going through. Rather than listen to him and help him express the feelings boiling up inside him, each of them wants to provide him with a packaged answer to his problems. Each wants to start from where he is rather than from where Job is.

Eliphaz's explanation of Job's troubles is the simple orthodox one and he brings it with the authority of divine revelation. In 4:12-16 he describes the experience which convinced him that the answer he is offering Job is true. God is always just; it is not the righteous who suffer, but fools (4:7-11; 5:1-7). No one can ever be perfect before God, so if Job is suffering it must be because he has committed some sin. He should repent and put himself in the right and if he does God will restore him (5:17-26). Job's present sufferings are God's loving discipline. He has only to repent to find God ready to bless him once again (5:18-19).

There is a great deal of truth in what Eliphaz says. God does discipline even the most loyal of his servants and we need to respond positively (Hebrews 12:4-11). But in recommending Job to trust in his piety (4:6) he fails to go deeply enough into the problem. Job's troubles are meant to lead him to put his trust in God, not in his own piety. Eliphaz has ignored Job's feelings and failed to listen to his complaint. As a result, his well-meaning advice comes over as a pat answer (5:27).

Job 6 - 7

Job wants his friends to realise the anguish he is feeling (6:1). Rather than hang on waiting for the good times which Eliphaz promises, he would prefer to die now (6:1-13). His friends have not helped him both because they will not listen and sympathise with his despair (6:14-23) and because they have not been able to tell him what sin he is being punished for (6:24-end). Listening to their advice is like a traveller, who looks forward to a cool, refreshing stream on a baking hot day, only to find it dried up. He insists that his bitter anguish is entirely justifiable. Life is full of hardship (7:1) and he himself has been made to suffer it in full measure (7:2-16). Why should God hold our sins against us? Why should he care so much if we sin? Would it not be far easier for God to overlook his sins and let him get on with life (7:17-end)?

When someone is suffering, one of the most important things we can do is to accept the way they are feeling and allow them to express it. One of the least helpful is to expect them to accept our certainties just because we are convinced it will do them good.

Day 236. Psalm 42; Job 8 - 10

God's Justice

Psalm 42

The writer is depressed and longs for the presence of God.

Job 8-10

In chapters 4 and 5, Eliphaz presented Job with a reasoned explanation for his suffering, but instead of accepting it Job pleaded with his friends to recognise the despair and anguish in his heart and make allowances for it. Now Bildad tries to persuade Job to accept his solution and repent. Bildad is a traditionalist. Whereas Eliphaz argued from personal revelation, Bildad's authority is the wisdom of the past (8:8-10). His explanation is essentially the same as Eliphaz. God is just, so only evil people are punished (8:2-3,11-19). If Job's children have died, they must have sinned (8:4). If Job repents, God will be sure to restore him (8:5-7,20-22). The reference to Job's children brings out the heartlessness and inhumanity of those who serve up pat answers to people who suffer without taking account of the struggle going on in their heart.

Bildad is trying to defend God, particularly against the charge of injustice. But Job replies that this is impossible. You cannot prove God's justice because you cannot summon him to explain himself. He is the Creator of the world, powerful enough to get his own way by sheer might. You cannot use God's justice as the basis of an argument because it can never be put to the test. In fact, some of the things God allows appear extremely unjust. In a plague, both good and bad perish (9:23). If a ruler is unjust, everyone suffers together (9:24).

If Job's sufferings are just, then it is according to God's rules, not human ones. God created him and he had no choice about whether to be born (10:8-12). Part of the conditions for living appears to be that you must be punished for your sins (10:13-17). But sin is inevitable. He is bound to sin and therefore bound to end up being punished. If only there was someone who could act as a mediator, to bring him and God together on the same level and enable them to speak face to face (9:32-34).

As in the previous reading, an important part of the eventual answer appears in this passage. Despite what Eliphaz has said (4:6), Job has to learn that you cannot trust your own piety, you can only trust God. He will also come to realise that the God you have to trust is the all-powerful Creator whose ways are bigger than we can understand. You cannot prove God's justice, you can only trust in it.

Christians know what Job did not, that God has, in fact, come alongside human beings and suffered all the consequences of his own justice. Not only do we see God face to face in Jesus, but he is the one who pleads our case before him (Romans 8:33-34; Hebrews 4:14-16; 1 John 2:1-2).

Day 237. Psalm 38; Job 11 - 14

The Vanity of Life

Psalm 38

The writer has fallen sick of a painful illness. His friends shun him because they think it is a punishment from God, while his enemies gloat over his misfortune. He knows he deserves punishment for his sin, but prays for God to relieve his suffering.

Job 11 - 14

Zophar answers in the same way as the other friends, this time accusing Job directly of sin (11:2-6,13-14). Like Eliphaz, his speech anticipates the eventual conclusion of the book, although he does not realise it. He calls on God to speak, not face to face as an equal, which is what Job has been asking for, but to oppose Job and put him in his place (11:5). Job had asked for God to overlook his sin and Zophar is sure that God does overlook some of it (11:6), but like the others he believes that if Job repents and throws himself on God's mercy all will be well (11:13-end).

Job's "comforters" are so busy trying to tell him the answer to his problems that they have failed to listen to him. Answering Eliphaz and Bildad he asked for comfort. Now, in the conclusion to the first cycle of speeches, he turns on his friends and insists that they are wrong. Their "wisdom" is far too simplistic (12:1-3). God's ways with mankind are not simple and straightforward, as they claim, but mighty and mysterious. He has power of life and death over every creature. He gives life, but also takes it away (12:7-10). The things he does are both good and bad (12:14,16). He overthrows established order by his power (12:17-23) and makes a mockery of what people call wisdom (12:17,20,24-25). In trying to defend God, Job's friends have actually given a false picture of him (13:7-8). Their "orthodoxy" is nothing but half truth. They had better beware when God catches up with them (13:9-10; 42:7).

Job is fed up with the second hand knowledge of God his friends calls wisdom and piety. He wants first hand experience (13:1-4). Rather than driving him away from God, his suffering is driving him towards him. But to come near to God he has to reject the kind of safe orthodoxy which has

an answer for every situation. To step beyond the safe answers of his friends, Job knows he is taking an enormous risk (13:15), but he can't believe that God will punish him for it. What he wants to do is to know him face to face, put his case to him and be cleared (13:16-24). As it is, life is short and meaningless and ends in death (14:1-12). The knowledge of God which might make it bearable is denied. But supposing there were a new life, in which sin is no longer a barrier between us and God (14:13-17)! Job thinks of it only to reject it as impossible (14:18-end).

Christians know that this is what God has freely given us in Jesus - a new life, not just beyond the grave but here and now. In this life, the complaint of Job and Ecclesiastes is answered. Life is no longer meaningless and death is not the end (13:21-22). Sin is no longer a barrier because through the Holy Spirit God tells us where we have gone wrong and accepts our repentance (13:23-24). But before we can know and appreciate this new life for all it is, many of us have to follow Job through despair and out the other side where knowledge of God is not safe second-hand orthodoxy but based on personal experience.

Day 238. Psalm 22; Job 15 - 19

Faith in the Midst of Despair

Psalm 22

The writer thinks that God has abandoned him. He may have saved others in the past (22:3-5), but he himself doesn't deserve it (22:6-8). Yet it was God who gave him life; surely he will rescue him (22:9-11). Finally he does pray for deliverance (22:19-20) and anticipates the Lord's answer in praise (22:22-end).

Job 15 - 17

A new cycle begins with the second speech of Eliphaz. As before, his concern is for piety (4:6; 15:4) but this time, like Bildad, he calls on the authority of tradition (15:10). Like all the previous exchanges, Eliphaz's words look forward to what God will eventually say, but he draws the wrong conclusions. We cannot understand God's ways (15:7-8), but this should lead us to humility rather than confidence in our own rightness (15:9).

As the friends get angrier with Job, he gets angrier with them! He is furious with his "miserable comforters" (16:1-3). In a series of vivid images, he pictures God as his tormentor (16:7-9,12-14) - and his friends are joining in (16:9-11)! But before he lapses into despair again in chapter 17, Job's anger rouses him to a moment of faith in which he returns to the idea of a mediator between him and God (9:33-34). He is sure there is a witness for him somewhere, a friend to stand before God and plead his cause (16:18-21).

Job 18 - 19

Like Eliphaz (15:17-end), Bildad is increasingly desperate to prove the point that the wicked will suffer in the end (18:5-end). They have stopped trying to comfort Job and become more concerned to prove themselves in the right, to "crush Job with words" (19:2). Job repeats that God is tormenting him (19:7-12). His friends, family and even his servants have abandoned him (19:13-20). He is looking for mercy, but finding none (19:21-22). Yet he still believes that in the end he will be vindicated. The mediator of chapter 9

and the advocate of chapter 16 is now the redeemer or "go'el" (19:25), the near relative whose duty it was to look after a less fortunate family member. The text of verses 23-27 is very complicated and difficult to translate, but it seems as if Job is bringing together his hope for an advocate before God with his idea of a new life (14:13-17). One day, even if it is after death, he will see God face to face and be accepted.

Day 239. Psalm 55; Job 20 - 23

The Fate of the Wicked

Psalm 55

The writer has been abandoned by a friend, who has turned against him and by his plausible attacks set others against him (55:12-14,20-21). The sense of being beset by enemies overwhelms him (55:4-8). Yet in his distress he turns to God for comfort, sure that he will see justice done (55:22-23).

Job 20 - 21

Zophar adds little to what has gone before, although he begins his speech in pompous style (20:2). He is simply defending the position the others have taken and which he sees as the only safe opinion: evil does not pay and the wicked will always be punished in the end. The avarice which spurred the rich man on to amass his wealth will not die down once he has acquired it. His desires will not leave him in peace and he will be ruined by them (20:20-22).

But this is not the way things seem to Job. When he looks at the world it seems that the wicked *do* prosper. Their children may be punished, but what do they care as long as they do not live to see it (21:19-21)? The fate of one individual and the fate of another are so different it is impossible to account for it (21:22-26). But it is a matter of record that time after time the wicked get away with their wickedness, and go on living in peace until their dying day (21:29-33). The arguments of his friends are nothing but rubbish (21:34).

Job 22 - 23

The third cycle opens with Eliphaz making the same points as before. It is impious to question God's ways. He is in heaven and we on earth; he is not affected by our conduct so his judgement is just but impersonal. Railing at him and asking for dialogue does no good. For Eliphaz it is a sign of wickedness. By claiming that God is far away and doesn't see what is happening to him, Job seems to have lined himself up with the wicked (22:12-18). He has refused to take refuge in simple piety as Eliphaz has urged (4:6; 15:4; 22:4), so Eliphaz now condemns him to his face as a sinner (22:5-11).

But Job is not put off. What he wants is to see God face to face, to stand before him, present his case and be declared accepted (23:1-7). Yet God seems as far away as ever (23:8-9). But Job knows that he has not been wicked; he knows the picture of him which Eliphaz presents is false (23:11-12). So at last he begins to realise that everything that is happening to him is a trial, sent by God to test him (23:10). It is hard, but he resolves that he will come through it (23:13-17).

Day 240. Psalm 73; Job 24 - 28

The Way to True Wisdom

Psalm 73

The writer has been going through a trial of faith as he thinks about the prosperity of the wicked. It seems to him that evil, arrogant men enjoy all the good things of the world - health, wealth and the approval of others - while he has none of them. But looking back, he now sees that he had it all wrong, and is glad that he did not speak out at the time of his bitterness (73:15,21-22). It was when he went to worship that he got things into perspective. The wicked have nothing to hope for and none of the security which comes from trusting in God. In the end, faith in God is its own reward. To know God is better than all the good things of this world (73:25). What is more, the writer expects this sense of the presence of God to continue beyond the grave (73:24,26). We have seen in passages such as Job 3:13-19 and Ecclesiastes 9:1-6 that Israel had no expectation of a life beyond death other than the shadowy existence of Sheol. This makes Job's expressions of faith in 14:14-17 and 19:23-27 and those in Psalms such as 16:9-11, 23:4 and 73:23-26 all the more remarkable.

Job 24 - 27

The ending of the third cycle of speeches is a puzzle. There is no speech for Zophar, but some of the words given to Job, especially in 27:13-end, contradict his previous speech at 21:7-21 and look very like the kind of thing Zophar should be saying. On the other hand, like the writer of Psalm 73, Job may be changing his mind. In the middle of his troubles, he has begun to believe that God will be faithful to him even beyond death (19:23-27) and to see his sufferings as a trial of his faith in which he must stand firm (23:10). So perhaps, like the psalmist, he is able to see things in a different light.

In chapter 24, Job begins by lamenting the lack of justice in the world. The poor are cheated and go without the basic necessities of life, and no one seems to care (24:1-12). Meanwhile, the wicked scheme at night and no one sees them (24:13-17). But then Job changes his tone. The wicked will get their comeuppance in the end. They have no assurance of life, nothing to

trust in beyond their wealth (24:22). They go down to death with nothing to hope in (26:5; 27:8).

Despite the change in his outlook, Job is still not ready to make peace with his "comforters." In chapter 25, Bildad repeats their basic proposition that God is not affected by our efforts to be righteous, that no one can attain purity. Job angrily dismisses him. This "wisdom" may be fine for the philosopher, but it will not help the ordinary man or woman who wants to know how to live (26:2-3). He will agree that God is not only all-powerful but terrifying (26:5-14), but he still insists that it is not impious to want to know him and live in fellowship with him.

Job 28

Although put into the mouth of Job, this magnificent poem on the subject of divine wisdom acts as a commentary on the argument so far. Like Proverbs 2:13-15, the poem compares wisdom with precious stones, but concentrates on the search for them. By their ingenuity, men can dig deep into the earth and bring out its treasures. But not only is wisdom more valuable than jewels, but mankind, for all their skill and ingenuity cannot find it out. Only God knows the way to true wisdom and men and women can learn of it only by revelation. True wisdom is found only in the fear of God.

Day 241. Psalm 26; Job 29 - 31

The Complaint of a Righteous Man

Psalm 26

The writer asks God to recognise the efforts he has made to live a good life.

Job 29 - 31

Job makes his final statement. He has been asking God to give him a fair hearing and although God has not yet answered he believes that he is listening (23:10). At the end he metaphorically signs it and hands it over for God's decision (31:35).

Chapter 29 presents a picture of the ideal of a righteous man. He shares with Abraham the privilege of God's friendship (29:4; see Isaiah 41:8; 2 Chronicles 20:7; James 2:23). God watches over him (29:2) and blesses him (29:3,6). Righteousness is habitual and fitting (29:14). He enjoys the respect of his neighbours (29:7-11,21-25) and is recognised as a universal benefactor (29:12-13,15-17). Besides wealth and respect, he looks forward to a long life and a peaceful death (29:18-20).

In chapter 30, this picture of the ideal righteous man whom everyone in the community looks up to is compared with a picture of the kind of person everyone despises, the layabout, incapable of working for a living, scratching an existence on the margins of society (30:1-8). For Job, one of the worst aspects of his suffering is to be mocked by the idle sons of such people and made the butt of their jokes (30:9-15). To be reduced to such a state is a sign that God has really abandoned him. In 30:13-15 he pictures himself as a besieged city finally overthrown and at the mercy of its enemies. His dignity and his safety have gone. The disasters that have come upon him have removed the boundaries which separated him from the people he despises. The public mask, behind which he could appear to his neighbours as an upright and respectable citizen, has been taken away. The loss of this public mask means that his soul is laid bare before God. Job is about to find out who he really is in God's sight.

In chapter 31, he reverts to his former life again, looking this time at the sins he avoided. Again, this is a picture of Israel's ideal of righteous conduct. The righteous man is not a slave to lust and avoids even the

thought of adultery (31:1,9-12). He avoids deceit and is honest and straightforward in all his dealings (31:5-6). He is a good and just employer (31:13-15) and landlord (31:38-40). As a wealthy citizen, he accepts his share of responsibility for the poor (31:16-23) and does not take advantage of their powerlessness (31:21). In particular, he avoids the sin of omission of which he would be guilty if he simply ignored their plight (31:19-20). He avoids idolatry, including the idolatry of placing his security in wealth (31:24-28). He is generous not only to his friends but to enemies and strangers (31:29-32). Finally, he does not conceal his sin to preserve the respect of his neighbours (31:33-34). Righteousness for the Israelite was not just a case of keeping to the letter of the laws, but conscientiously observing their spirit.

But although his life had been blameless, Job did not know God as deeply as he might. Previously, he put his trust in his piety (1:5), and one of the motives behind his scrupulous avoidance of evil was the fear of punishment (31:3-4,12,14-15,23). Satan had asked, "Does Job fear God for nothing," and although Job had not abandoned God in his trials, the effect of them had been to strip away all the other things on which he might have relied - health, happiness, wealth and the respect of his neighbours. So long as he enjoyed these blessings he thought God was with him (29:5). He did not yet realise that God was with him in the bad times as well as the good.

Day 242. Psalm 32; Job 32:1- 36:21

Elihu

Psalm 32

The first half of this psalm looks like an expression of conventional wisdom. The writer has been suffering because of his sin and found relief only when he confessed it. But verses 8-9 introduce a prophecy in which God urges the penitent sinner to listen to his instruction and follow it. He is looking for more than obedience to the law, but a personal relationship of guidance and trust.

Job 32:1 - 36:21

Elihu's entrance two thirds of the way through the book creates a puzzle. He has not been mentioned before, nor is he mentioned in the epilogue when the original three friends are taken to task (42:7). It looks as if his long speech has been added after an earlier version of the book, including the introduction and conclusion, had already been completed. But if so, what is the purpose of it?

One possibility is that a later wise man thought that something important had been left out of the argument and decided to put it into the mouth of an extra character. This is clearly what Elihu himself thinks (32:10-14). If so, the extra argument he contributes is the idea of suffering as a discipline. When people suffer, it is because God is waiting for them to repent and seek him in the proper way. If he appears not to help the oppressed, it is because they do not really care about him and have not really cried to him to save them (35:9-13; 36:8-15). Pain, says Elihu, is one of the methods God uses to speak to us (33:14-22). Job should listen and repent before it is too late (36:16-21).

Another and more likely reason, however, is that Elihu is introduced at this point to show up the shallowness of the orthodox doctrine of sin and punishment. His name means, "He is my God," the son of "God has blessed." This points to a comfortable orthodoxy which knows nothing of trial or suffering. The poetry of his speech is of a much lower quality than that in the rest of the book and his style is longwinded. In fact, he is a pompous windbag! Despite his fine words (32:6-17), much of what he says

has already been covered in the previous speeches. In 34:5-9 he accuses Job of using the same arguments as the wicked, a point previously made by Eliphaz in 22:12-18. He goes on to use God's justice as the basis of his argument, a position Job has already refuted in 21:17-26.

Perhaps Elihu is meant to represent a particular school of thinking which attracted several self-confident "angry young men" without much experience of the real world (32:6-9,18-20). His speech is included here to show how weak their arguments really were. We have already been told that Job is God's servant, not the wicked man they paint him. He is not questioning God's ways presumptuously, but seeking to understand them. Most important, he is not speaking from hearsay or tradition, or trying to establish a purely intellectual argument. He is trying to make sense of deep personal experience. "Wisdom" which does not engage with the bewilderment and anguish we often experience is shallow and worthless.

Day 243. Psalm 25; Job 36:22 - 39:end

The Greatness of God

Psalm 25

The writer asks God to teach him his ways. He needs to be penitent, humble and fear God before he can learn (25:8-14), but if he does, he will have a way of life that will give him confidence in the face of his enemies and lead him to blessing.

Job 36:22 - 37:end

As Elihu draws to a close, a storm, one of the traditional signs of God's approach (Exodus 19:16; Psalm 29; 77:16-19), begins to brew. Pointing to it, he praises the majesty and power of God. The power of the storm demonstrates the greatness of the God who creates and controls it. We can never understand God; he is beyond our reach (37:23). We can only accept his creation and live within it.

Job 38 - 39

Job and his friends have exhausted their arguments and now it is time for God to speak. Job has been asking for God to answer him face to face, but God is not coming to answer Job but to question him (38:3).

Through his questions God reveals himself as the Creator of the world, whose wisdom is beyond human comprehension. He is the master builder, who set the world on secure foundations (38:4-7). He has power over the rebellious sea and set limits for it to prevent it engulfing the earth (38:8-11; see Psalm 104:5-9). He separated Day from Night and brings morning to put an end to the deeds of the wicked that take place under the cover of darkness (38:12-15). Below the earth, beneath the waters of the great deep, lies Sheol, the place of the dead, to which no living person has ever journeyed. Only God knows the way to it. And this is just one of the places in the world that Job will never see (38:16-18). God alone, who separated Light from Darkness (Genesis 1:4), knows where to find them (38:19-21). He is the controller of the weather (38:22-38) and fixes the stars in their place (38:31-33).

Then God shows Job the animal kingdom, in which many creatures live their lives without reference to human beings, yet God cares for them all (38:39 - 39:12). Not only are these creatures independent of human beings, but their ways of life are incomprehensible. Who would have thought of something like the ostrich (39:13-18), a bird that can't fly but runs instead, who no sooner lays her eggs than forgets them and leaves the care of her young to chance. Even the horse, whose strength and courage men make use of in battle does not derive these qualities from us but from God (39:19-25).

What are we to make of God's answer? In one way, it is not an answer at all, but a rebuke. How could Job ever think that God would consent to answer him man to man? If even the questions of creation lie outside human comprehension, how can we expect to understand the deeper questions of human suffering? At the same time, Job's comforters are also discredited, since they were confident there *was* an answer and that they had it. The answer to the mystery of suffering is known only to God himself.

Day 244. Psalm 130; Job 40 - 42

God's Answer

Psalm 130

A psalm of penitence.

Job 40 - 41

The speeches of God show Job where he had gone wrong. Job had not failed the test, but his anguish and bitterness had led him into error. He had questioned the ways of God, and in particular he had questioned God's justice (40:8). Earlier, in the argument with his friends, Job had insisted that you could not prove God's justice, but although he was right on this point, he did not take the next step to conclude that you simply have to trust in it (chapter 21). Despite the extent of his suffering, God was not going to let him off. He wants his servants to grow in knowledge of him in every circumstance, even the difficult ones.

Job's basic failing was pride. Like most of us, he thought he deserved better than he was getting. As a wealthy man, he was used to being able to plan his life and control the circumstances. When his life was turned upside-down by circumstances beyond his control, his reaction was to call on God to explain himself. But God refused to do that. Instead, in chapters 38 and 39 he showed that he is beyond comprehension. In chapters 40 and 41, he points to two images of pride in his creation, the hippopotamus and the great sea monster, "the king over all that are proud" (41:34). Outside human control, they are well under the control of God - and so are frail but proud human beings.

Job 42:1-6

Like the writer of Psalm 73, Job realises that in his bitterness he has been like a beast towards God (Psalm 73:21-22). He has been a fool to presume to question God (42:3), and he repents of his pride and foolishness. Yet in a way Job is also vindicated by God's speeches. He has rejected the hearsay evidence and second-hand wisdom of his friends and called for God to make himself known in a personal way, and this is what God has done. God has met him and now he knows him in a deeper way even than Eliphaz with his supernatural revelations (4:12-17).

Job 42:7-end

The trial is now at an end. Satan has been triumphantly defeated and retired from the scene. Despite his sufferings, made worse by the incomprehension of his friends, Job has remained God's servant (42:8). Although Eliphaz and his friends said many true things and Job made many errors, the friends were wrong on the central proposition. Job was not suffering for any sin he had committed. He did not need to repent and was right to maintain his integrity. The friends need to ask his pardon and admit before God that their hearsay wisdom did not get to the heart of the matter.

Job's prosperity is not a reward for his righteousness. If it were, this would award the game to his friends. It is simply that the trial is now over and the judge agrees to restore Job to his former situation, a prosperous and righteous man, albeit with a deeper knowledge of God than before. He is given twice the wealth he had before and the same number of sons and daughters, but the beauty of his daughters and their dignity in inheriting along with their brothers marks Job's family out as special.
