UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

STUDY BOOK

SUMMER 2024

WISDOM FOR THE WALK

Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs

UtB

Thru-the-Bible
Book by Book

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

is organized according to a systematic, sensible plan that will take you through every book of the Bible.

	SEPTEMBER	DECEMBER	MARCH	JUNE
2022/23	Philippians, Colossians	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther	Revelation	Ezekiel, Daniel
2023/24	Mark	Psalms	Galatians, Ephesians	Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs
2024/25	Acts	Genesis	1, 2 Thessalonians, Jude	Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Micah
2025/26	Luke	Exodus	1 Corinthians	Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
2026/27	Hebrews	Joshua	2 Corinthians	Isaiah
2027/28	Matthew	Judges, Ruth	1, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon	Jeremiah, Lamentations
2028/29	Romans	1, 2 Samuel	1, 2 Peter	Nah., Zeph., Hab., Obad., Hag., Zech., Mal.
2029/30	John	1, 2 Kings, 1, 2 Chronicles	James 1, 2, 3 John	Proverbs

Next quarter:

Acts

Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs

Lessons

Features

Job

Because it addresses both human suffering and divine sovereignty, Job is considered one of the most complex and difficult books of the Bible.

Views about the main message of this book vary widely. Some Bible interpreters focus on its beauty as a collection of poems dealing with the meaning of life and suffering. Still others point out how it proves that there is no constant, direct relationship between right actions and earthly rewards. And some note that Job exemplifies how human beings can question God, while still trusting and obeying His good will.

Regardless, the crux of the book seems to be that Job was a remarkable example of faith, because he accepted God's sovereignty even though he did not understand why he suffered.

People in the midst of suffering often appeal to the book of Job to help them grapple with their misery and grow in their faith.

Purpose

In some respects Job is a long answer to a pointed question: if God is the sovereign Lord of the universe, then why does He allow suffering to come to the godly, and good things to the wicked? For Job, thinking about this question moved him to consider the nature of God. In the face of Job's multiple calamities, he was forced to examine the foundations of his faith and to scrutinize his concept of the Lord.

Thus Job found himself struggling with this question as well as with his counselors' traditional answers to it. His counselors' primary view, stated and discounted throughout the book, was that human suffering is a direct result of personal sin. They believed that God punishes the wicked in this life by sending affliction; He rewards the righteous in this life by providing blessings. But such a view did nothing to clear up Job's perplexity, since he knew he was a righteous man and had done nothing to earn the suffering he was having to endure.

Finally, God came out of a whirlwind and gave Job an answer to all his questions: trust the Lord regardless of the present circumstances. In the end, all Job's understanding, reason, and doubt had to give way to faith.

In addition to teaching about God's nature and humanity's suffering, the author may have had in mind some of the following purposes:

• To establish that we simply do not know enough about God and His ways to question His wisdom or justice.

• To expose the theological position that says "People suffer in proportion to their sins" as a shallow and erroneous doctrine.

• To prove that God—because He is all-powerful and all-knowing—can make use of any means and any situations to bring about His purposes.

• To demonstrate that God does not abandon those who suffer, but communicates with them as He chooses.

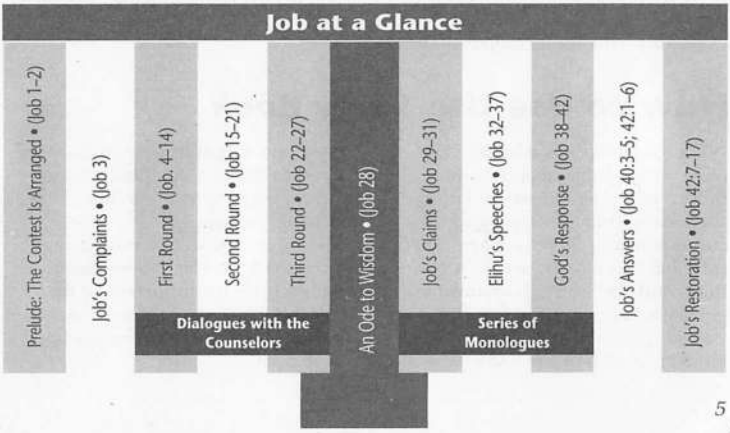
• To explain that, regardless of circumstances, people must accept God on His own terms.

• To suggest that believers can remain upright even in the midst of physical agony, emotional confusion, and spiritual testing.

• To teach the wisdom of people's complete submission to the will of God.

Author

The question of Job's authorship has been debated for centuries, and no one has come up with evidence for an answer that satisfies everyone. The main reason for this uncertainty is that Job itself neglects to identify its author. The complexity of its language makes it difficult even to determine the exact setting of its writing. Regardless, scholars have pointed out that there are some assumptions that we can reasonably infer about the author. For example, his empathy is so authentic that one can't help but wonder if he suffered similarly. If so, he also may have had a release from pain through a personal encounter with God. Also, whoever wrote Job had a different way of looking at suffering. The author was willing to challenge the assumtion



that suffering is always divine retribution for sinful actions.

One long-held view maintains that the historical person Job was himself the one who wrote the book, sometime after his ordeal. Clearly "Job" is a profound work of literature and a remarkable piece of history. But as the encounter between God and Satan in the prologue indicates, even if Job authored the text, it had to come to him by divine revelation.

Other views hold that while Job was a historical person, his story may have been recorded by someone else. Perhaps the author knew Job personally and made acute observations firsthand, carefully recording the poetic speeches. Or perhaps he lived years after Job, and God inspired Him to recount the history in poetic form.

Whatever view is taken, it is evident that the author possessed poetic genius, and his book was divinely inspired.

Date

No conclusive evidence has been found for determining when Job was written. An early date has been suggested because of the fact that the book makes no mention of the patriarchs, the 12 tribes of Israel, or Moses. This leads some to believe that the book was written in the time before Moses (about 1566–1446 B.C.). If so, then Job is the oldest book of the Bible. And if it is indeed the oldest book of the Bible, then it offers us insight into people's conceptions of God before they possessed any written revelation to guide them.

Some Bible scholars propose much later dates for the writing of Job. Whereas some say it was written during the reign of King Solomon (970–930 B.C.), others are far more general, saying it was written sometime between the times of Moses and Ezra.

How to Use the *Study Book*

This *Study Book* is meant to be used with a Bible open beside it. Before studying one of the lettered sections within a lesson, read the corresponding Bible passage. Then refer back and forth between your Bible and the Study Book until you get the meaning of the passage.

Also think about your personal answer to each of the "Ask Yourself" questions. Finally, come to class prepared to discuss the Bible passage and raise any questions that have occurred to you.

Note: Just because some passages are treated "in brief" does not mean that they are unimportant or that you shouldn't read those passages in your Bible as part of your study of these books.

1 Job's Faith Undergoes Testing

Job 1–3

a Job's Noble Character (1:1–5)

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.
—Job 1:1

In the prologue of Job (Job 1–2), six short but key scenes set the stage for Job's debate with his comforters and his ultimate encounter with God, described later.

- *Scene 1* (1:1–5) gives some background information about Job's good character and his family.
- *Scene 2* (vv. 6–12) tells about Satan's first challenge to God in which the devil gained the Lord's permission to destroy Job's family and possessions. Satan sought to prove that Job would curse his Creator when signs of God's blessing on his life ceased occurring.
- *Scene 3* (vv. 13–22) records Job's first test and how this godly man stood firm and faithful to God even after losing his family and possessions.
- *Scene 4* (2:1–6) divulges Satan's second challenge to God when the devil gained the Lord's permission to strike Job's body with disease.
- *Scene 5* (vv. 7–10) sets forth Job's second test—the onslaught of painful sores.
- *Scene 6* (vv. 11–13) recounts the

arrival of Job's comforters.

Throughout this first lesson we'll examine each of these six scenes.

The first thing we are told about Job is that he lived in the land of Uz (1:1). Because of various details in the book—for instance, that one of Job's friends was from the town of Teman in Edom—many consider the desert lands southeast of Canaan as the approximate location of Uz. This area was known for its small towns, farms, and migrating herds. To date, however, there has been no way of pinpointing the exact location of the land of Uz.

If Job had been a poor farmer, his suffering would have been terrible, but it would not have reached the level of tragedy and paradox that is described in this book. In the opening scene, the writer showed just how devout and rich Job was. The whole point of Satan's forthcoming challenge rested on the details this opening scene portrays. In essence, Satan would tell God, "Strike down a man to whom You have given everything, and he will curse You."

His being described as "blameless and upright" (v. 1) does not mean that Job was sinless. Rather, such a description points out that Job was a man of integrity—both spiritually mature and morally pure. He also "feared God and shunned evil." These characteristics are later used to define the essence of true wisdom (see 28:28).

Job had a large family, and his wealth (described in terms of flocks and servants) was immense. He was apparently richer than anyone else in the land of Uz (1:2, 3). Job was about to lose all these blessings.

By having his sons and daughters purified, and by sacrificing burnt offerings for them, Job functioned as a priest for his family (v. 5). That he did so is an indication that Job may have lived before the time of Moses. Scriptural and historical records indicate that before Moses introduced the ceremonial laws to the Israelites, the father of a household sometimes served as the priest for his family (i.e., Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob).

Even at this early point in history, Job recognized that sin is rooted in the heart of humanity and that a sacrifice is needed for the remission of sins. His concern that his children might have secretly cursed God, perhaps during or after a festive occasion (v. 4), introduces a recurring theme in Job. In the days that would follow, Job would refuse time and again, in spite of terrible sorrow and suffering, to curse his Lord.

In a real sense, then, Job is not so much about suffering as it is about God's sovereignty and wisdom. Unknown to Job, the true purpose of his upcoming suffering was to demonstrate in the face of Satan's challenge that he could stand as a supreme display of God's saving might. By remaining faithful to God under such distressing circumstances, he would demonstrate that true wisdom is rooted in the wisdom of God.

Ask Yourself . . . *How might a brief sketch of my own life and faith compare with that of Job's?*

b Job's Testing (1:6–22)

Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked I will depart.
The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
may the name of the LORD be praised.

—Job 1:21

This section features the second and third scenes of the prologue. In this section is recorded how Satan challenged God and then destroyed Job's wealth and family (except for his wife). The prologue describes two councils in heaven (1:6–12; 2:1–6). In looking at these councils, the reader—but not Job—catches a glimpse of the cosmic drama behind the tragic events of Job's life.

Both of the councils involved God, His angels, and Satan. The Hebrew word for angels refers to the supernatural beings who were created by the Lord to serve as His messengers and to carry out His bidding. Satan was one of the angels, but after his fall he began to roam the earth seeking to undermine the faith of believers (see 1 Pet. 5:8; Rev. 12:10).

When the angels presented themselves in God's presence, Satan tagged along. Thus the devil joined the other angels in the heavenly council that was about to take place.

With the angels before Him, God addressed Satan and asked where he had been. When Satan told the Lord that he had been roaming the earth, God asked him if he had noticed the devotion of Job (Job 1:6–8). God's

Satan, the Accuser

The name of the archenemy of God is derived from the Hebrew verb *satan*, which means to accuse, to oppose, or to attack. In the first two chapters of Job, the writer used the definite article with the name to call this evil angel, literally, "the Satan," meaning "the Accuser." Thus the author of the Book of Job emphasized that the chief role of the devil—opposing the purposes of the Lord—is carried out by his accusing and attacking those who place their faith in God.

Some Bible scholars believe that the use of this title for God's archenemy represents an early stage in the doctrine of Satan. In most cases, the Hebrew word *satan*, as it was used in the Old Testament, referred to human adversaries (see Ps. 109:6). But by the time of the writing of the New Testament, the Hebrew word had become a proper name for God's chief adversary.

description of Job in verse 8 closely resembles that in verse 1.

Satan responded to God's claims about Job by insinuating that Job was faithful to God only because he had been blessed with material wealth and family happiness (vv. 9, 10). If God were to strip Job of these blessings, the devil said, Job would break his covenant of faith in God (v. 11).

Satan's attack was not so much against Job as it was against God Himself. It may even reflect the essence of the ongoing struggle between Satan and the forces of evil, on the one hand, and God and the forces of righteousness on the other hand (see Gen. 3:14, 15; Rom. 16:20). Whatever the case, as Elmer Smick puts it in his commentary on the Book of Job, "the only way the Accuser [Satan] can be proven false is through Job."

God agreed to the plan suggested by Satan (Job 1:12). God did, however, limit the damage Satan was allowed to do by saying he could do anything except harm Job himself.

Perhaps one point being made here is that Satan is no less subordinate to God than are angels and humans. The devil was not permitted to wreak havoc in Job's life until he had obtained God's consent.

It was not God's purpose to single out Job for Satan's attacks. It was His purpose, however, to enable Job to glorify God through his steadfast faith.

Having been granted God's permission to do so, Satan left the Lord's presence to begin inflicting his evil against Job (v. 12b).

Verse 13 begins the recording of a rapid succession of reports about calamities that fell upon Job's possessions and family. Satan combined both human and natural forces to create these disasters. The Sabeans, who killed Job's servants and stole his oxen and donkeys, were probably from southern Arabia (vv. 13–15). The fire from the sky that burned up his servants and sheep may have been lightning (v. 16). The Chaldeans, who murdered his servants and led away his camels, most likely were nomads from Mesopotamia (v. 17). The great wind that caused the collapse of the house in which his children were feasting was most likely a desert whirlwind, similar to the one out of which God later spoke to Job (vv. 18–19; compare 38:1; 40:6). Apparently in a matter of minutes, Job learned he had lost his wealth, his servants, and his children.

Although Job probably expressed some measure of grief at losing his wealth and servants, it was when he learned that his children had been crushed by a collapsing house that he expressed his greatest measure of sorrow. Tearing one's robe and shaving one's head were common ways of expressing extreme grief in ancient times (1:20).

When told that all of his ten children had been killed, Job made no attempt to suppress or mask his grief. Nor should we attempt to hold back our tears and sorrow when we are faced with losing a dear family member or friend. Rather, openly

grieving should be considered part of our natural response in the face of loss. Most Christian counselors agree that expressing grief is beneficial, but we are not to grieve as those "who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13).

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I openly express my sense of grief when faced with the loss of family members or friends?*

Despite his sorrow, Job fell to the ground in a posture of worship and broke out into a psalm of submission to God's will (Job 1:20–21). In this psalm, he acknowledged that, as a mortal man, he could not expect to hold on to earthly blessings indefinitely. In giving Job blessings and in taking them away, God had been within His rights, so Job concluded, "May the name of the LORD be praised" (v. 21).

Thus instead of cursing God, as Satan had hoped he would do, Job blessed the Lord. He would not accuse God of doing evil to him (v. 22), and in that way he foiled Satan's attempt at proving that Job only worshiped God for the blessings he might receive from Him.

C Satan's Final Attack on Job (2:1–10)

So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes.

—Job 2:7–8

The fourth scene of the prologue is of a second heavenly council, in which Satan issued a second challenge to God about His servant Job. This second council began with preliminary speeches almost identical to the first. God asked Satan where he had been, and Satan replied that he had been roaming the earth (vv. 1–2).

Satan offered no report of what he had done to Job or of Job's response to his actions. But God showed that He knew what had transpired by reminding the evil one of Job's blamelessness and saying, "He still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him

Put to the Mouth of the Sword

Through Satan's design, Job's servants became the victims of military might. The phrase translated "put . . . to the sword" (Job 1:15, 17) more literally means "put to the mouth of the sword." This wording may reflect the fact that in ancient times swords were sometimes fashioned with a hilt in the shape of a lion's head. When a sword was assembled in this manner, the blade protruded from the mouth of the lion. Later, this image was used to portray the might of the Messiah (see Rev. 1:16; 2:16; 19:15).

without any reason" (v. 3).

The phrase "you incited me" does not suggest that God can be provoked into doing something against His will. The Lord was simply pointing out that Satan had challenged the reasons for Job's faithfulness to God, and the Lord had allowed Satan to test Job. As it turned out, Satan had inflicted great misery on Job "without any reason," since Job's faith had remained firm.

Of course, Satan disagreed with God's evaluation of Job's integrity. He cynically countered that Job, like anyone else, was willing to sacrifice his family's skin so as to save his own (v. 4). In other words, even Job's psalm of praise amidst his suffering, in Satan's warped view, was a sham. It was Job's clever way of putting everything into the bargain to save himself. Hence, Satan argued, if he would be allowed to attack Job's own skin, then Job would give in and curse God (v. 5).

This time, God gave Satan permission to attack Job's body, but not without another limitation. Satan could cause any sort of torture he might select, but he could not take Job's life (v. 6).

And so the devil left God's presence and afflicted Job with painful sores (v. 7). These sores apparently arose from some type of rare and terrible disease. Symptoms of the disease included boil-like inflammations that caused ceaseless itching (vv. 7–8), excruciating bone decay (30:17), discolored and peeling skin, and high fevers (v. 30). When Job could find a way to sleep during the intense pain and misery, he suffered horrible nightmares (7:13–14).

Whatever the disease, the once-majestic landlord ended up on an ash heap, scraping himself with a potsherd because of the interminable itching. Although some believe Job sat in a pile of ashes because he felt sorry for himself, and this was a way for him to mourn his own condition, it is more likely that he thought the ash heap to have medicinal qualities. Many people of the ancient Near East considered an ash mound to be the most healthful place a man with sores could sit.

At this point in the story of Job's suffering, his wife comes onto the scene. She was apparently the sole family member to have survived all the disasters to fall upon Job. Looking upon her husband in the midst of his suffering, she encouraged him to curse God and die (2:9). Evidently, Satan had thought ahead when bringing disaster upon Job's family. He spared Job's wife, perhaps thinking he could later use the person closest to Job to achieve his evil ends, just as in the Garden of Eden he had used Eve to encourage Adam to give in to temptation.

Ask Yourself . . . *When my family members and friends are suffering, do I encourage or discourage them in their faith in God?*

Job's response to his wife's suggestion should be seen not as insensitive or harsh. By calling her foolish, he did not mean that she was ignorant, but that she was irresponsible in advising him to break his

habit of moral uprightness and deny God (v. 10).

In Job's way of thinking, it would have been wrong to have accepted God's blessings in the past and then to curse God for the painful troubles He allowed in the present (vs. 10b). Thus he refused his wife's advice and refused as well to give in to temptation. He declared the same trust in God that he had declared after his first test, and proved that God's confidence in him was well placed (v. 10; compare 1:22).

Worldly Wisdom versus Godly Wisdom

When Job's wife viewed his ongoing suffering, she advised him to curse God and die (Job 2:9). In this, she was following worldly wisdom like that of an ancient Canaanite proverb which stated, "If ants are smitten, they do not receive [passively], but they bite the hand of the man who smites them." But in his response to his wife's words, Job called her to follow a godly form of wisdom by saying, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (v.10; compare 1:22).

d The Arrival of Job's Comforters (2:11–13)

When Job's three friends . . . heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him.

—Job 2:11

In this final scene of the prologue, three friends of Job—men named Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—arranged a meeting so that they could offer their support and comfort to Job, who remained in a state of suffering (v. 11). But instead of providing consolation (except for the first seven days and nights, in which they remained silent), they would only add to Job's suffering as well as to his mental and spiritual torment. In some ways, with the attendance of these "comforters," Satan continued his attack on Job. In fact, this may have been the evil one's most trying attack of all.

Because of the time it took in those days for news to travel, Job's friends may not have arrived at his home until months after Job's catastrophe. Job had continued to suffer throughout that time, and by the time of his friends' arrival, was barely recognizable (v. 12).

When Job's comforters came together and saw the plight of their friend, they were stunned. Immediately, they began the rituals of grief that were common in those days—

weeping, tearing robes, and sprinkling dust on their heads (v. 12).

Once these rituals had been completed, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar initiated an act of mourning usually reserved for death or disaster—sitting in silence next to Job for seven days and nights (v. 13; compare Gen. 50:10; 1 Sam. 31:13). To have spoken to Job during those seven days would have been contrary to custom.

Today Christian counselors affirm that just being with a suffering person can be a far more effective way to comfort that person than to talk to him or her about philosophy or even theology. If only Job's friends had continued to sit with him and perhaps voice a word or two of consolation, rather than indulging in profound speeches! But once they began trying to explain the reasons for Job's agony, they failed to achieve the purpose they had originally intended, that is, to comfort their friend.

Ask Yourself . . . *What approach do I take when I am trying to comfort a family member or friend who is suffering?*

Job 3 in Brief

Perhaps in response to seeing his three friends, Job began to voice his utter despair. Mixed in with his cursing of the day he was born (rather than God) were questions about the meaning of life, especially when accompanied by misery. If he had died at birth, he said, he would now be asleep with no pain or worries. Forgetting about his many years of prosperity and joy, Job could now think only of his suffering. Yet despite his impatience, despair, and lamenting, Job did not curse God.

JOB'S COMFORTERS

Job's three friends were likely princes and sages in each of their own areas.

Eliphaz's name was derived from an Arabic word meaning "God is the victor." He was from Teman, an Edomite city south of Canaan that was known to be a center for philosophical discussions. Teman is the only hometown of the three comforters that can be definitely located today.

The name *Bildad* came from a Hebrew phrase meaning "Baal is Lord." Bildad may have been a descendant of Shuah, Abraham's youngest son by his wife Keturah. His tribe of Shuhites probably made their home somewhere east of Canaan, but the precise location of their settlement is unknown (Gen. 25:2, 6).

Zophar is translated as "little bird." His tribe was from Naamah, perhaps a small town in Arabia.

2 The Counsel of Job's Friends

Job 4–14

a Eliphaz Addresses Job's Suffering (4:1–11)

Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished?
Where were the upright ever destroyed?
As I have observed, those who plow evil
and those who sow trouble reap it.

—Job 4:7–8

After Job's lament (Job 3), Eliphaz, who had been waiting silently with the other comforters for seven days, initiated a speech in response to Job's words of despair. It seems that as soon as Job finished his complaint, Eliphaz felt he had to answer in spite of Job's condition (4:1–2). It may have been that Eliphaz wanted to be sympathetic to Job's suffering. But the philosophical questions raised by Job's curses and bleak outlook caused Eliphaz to launch into a retort rather than express an attitude of understanding and compassion. The speech that ensued set the stage for all else that he and the other comforters would later say.

At first, Eliphaz complimented Job. He praised his friend for the wise counsel he had offered to those who had come to him. He acknowledged that Job's advice had strengthened people who were troubled (vv. 3–4).

Then Eliphaz's compliments turned to a warning, in which he encouraged Job to consider an important truth. It was a truth that Eliphaz had picked up from experience and that was consistent with the traditional view of the Eastern sages. This truth was Eliphaz's law of sin and suffering. That is, because God is a just God, goodness is rewarded and wickedness is punished in this life.

Even though Eliphaz probably would have agreed that sometimes suffering does come to the righteous, he believed that such suffering was always limited. In a sense, Eliphaz was telling Job that if he were upright and blameless, he should not worry about his misery lasting for too long. Even though discouraging and dismaying troubles had entered his life, Job could still hope to be saved from his desperate situation if he could take

confidence in his piety and hope in his blamelessness (vv. 5–6).

Some people detect an air of preaching against Job in Eliphaz's words. They say Eliphaz may have been insinuating that Job was unable to apply to himself what he had taught others. More likely, however, is that Eliphaz was endorsing Job's faith and attempting to revive him by telling him that God blesses the good and condemns the bad.

Eliphaz's summary of his law of sin and suffering is recorded in verses 7–11. Evidently, Eliphaz had never known of an instance in which an innocent person suffered unduly or in which an evil person reaped blessings undeservedly. To illustrate the second part of his point, he referred to planting and harvesting. Just as farmers reap the crops they plant, so also the wicked receive punishment for the evil they do. Eliphaz referred also to lions, which for a time prey on weaker animals and people, but eventually meet their doom. So the wicked are eventually destroyed by God's wrath.

What was the problem with Eliphaz's counsel? Perhaps he was so determined to get his own theological views across to Job that he was blind to Job's suffering. Eliphaz seems not to have realized that sitting right in front of him was a man whose experience completely contradicted the law of sin and suffering he had just stated. While he argued that innocent people do not suffer extensively, in the ashes before him sat Job, blameless and upright but nonetheless devastated by terrible catastrophes and suffering from an incurable disease.

In short, though Eliphaz approached Job with more sensitivity than Bildad and Zophar would later do, he still failed miserably as a comforter or a counselor. Instead of offering consolation to Job, he jumped into a debate—the last thing a suffering person needs.

Eliphaz referred to the destruction of lions to illustrate how evildoers will eventually be punished (Job 4:10–11).

Ask Yourself . . . *What is my first response when someone, especially someone in pain or trouble, says something contrary to Scripture?*

b The Spirit of Eliphaz's Dream (4:12–21)

Amid disquieting dreams in the night,
when deep sleep falls on people,
fear and trembling seized me
and made all my bones shake.
A spirit glided past my face,
and the hair on my body stood on end.

—Job 4:13–15

Since Job in his curses and complaints seemed to have questioned the wisdom and justice of God, Eliphaz hoped to straighten him out. Job's friend had already appealed to his own observations. But perhaps seeing that his personal observations lacked authority, Eliphaz decided to tell Job about a dream of his.

While in a deep sleep, Eliphaz received a message, whispered to him in the midst of a disturbing dream (vv. 12–13). To Eliphaz, the dream was frightening, even hair-raising, especially when a spirit glided past his face (vv. 14–15).

The spirit in Eliphaz's dream had a form that Eliphaz could not clearly discern. Yet when the spirit stopped his movement, he spoke to Eliphaz in a hushed voice (v. 16).

The spirit's message pointed out humanity's inferiority to God. Compared to the holy God, men and women are deeply sinful (vv. 17). Even God's immortal servants—the angels—fall far short of God's standards (v. 18), so certainly mortal humans do so to an even greater degree.

The spirit compared the frail human body to both a house of clay (vv. 19–20) and a tent (v. 21). Just as a house of clay can be easily shattered and a tent can be easily taken down, so the human body is vulnerable to death.

Deep Sleep & Dreams

Many Old Testament characters experienced God's use of deep sleep and a resulting dream to communicate His message to them, much like what Eliphaz claimed to have experienced (Job 4:12–21). Abraham fell into a deep sleep, after which God told him about the 400 years his people would be enslaved in Egypt (Gen. 15:12–16). Jacob had a dream in which God instructed him to return from Paddan Aram to his own land, Canaan (31:10–13). God used dreams as well to communicate to Joseph (37:5–11) and Solomon (I Kings 3:5–15).

A Bedouin tent. Eliphaz compared the human body to a tent that can be easily taken down (Job 4:21).

Eliphaz believed that Job had criticized God, and he was disturbed by this. So he related the spirit's message to prove that sinful, mortal human beings are so far below God that we have no right to criticize Him or call into question His character.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I consider myself to have the right to question God?*

Job 5–7 in Brief

Eliphaz went on to suggest that the devastation falling upon Job was due to his foolishness. Eliphaz implied that, by not humbling himself before God, Job had brought all his troubles upon himself (5:1–7).

Eliphaz then recited two beautiful poems, perhaps to demonstrate that Job could still call upon God to forgive and heal him. Both poems (vv. 8–16 and vv. 17–27) are about the holiness and goodness of God, and both address the way God sends healing and restoration after He corrects His people.

Job responded to Eliphaz's speech by losing his temper. First he verbally attacked his comforters (Job 6), and then he turned his complaints toward God (Job 7). His excuse for his outburst was that he was overcome with misery. In this eruption of anger, Job complained that the comforters had been of no help to him, and he repeated his desire that God would strike him dead. He also complained about humanity's hard lot and about his own misery. Job could only see God's attention as a negative thing.

C Bildad Advises Job (8:1–7)

But if you will seek God earnestly
and plead with the Almighty,
if you are pure and upright,
even now he will rouse himself
on your behalf
and restore you to your
prosperous state.
Your beginnings will seem
humble,
so prosperous will your future
be. **—Job 8:5–7**

The second of Job's comforters to speak was Bildad (v. 1), and he

turned out to be just as heartless in his advice as had Eliphaz, perhaps even worse. He ignored Job's suffering, and attacked Job head-on. Apparently not even making an attempt to relieve the misery of his friend, Bildad bluntly called Job a windbag, telling him that his words were "a blustering wind" (v. 2).

Bildad asked if God perverts justice (v. 3). Of course, the answer is that God does not pervert justice. But probably Bildad believed that when Job claimed he did not deserve his suffering, he was charging God with doing injustice.

Bildad's presumption was simple and ruthless. Since God is just and would not bring suffering to innocent people, then by their deaths Job's children had received punishment for their sins (v. 4). By extension, Job too was being punished for his sins.

To Bildad, there was a simple solution to all Job's troubles. Bildad advised Job to plead with God for forgiveness for whatever wrong he had done. Then if Job would return to a pious lifestyle, God would act on Job's behalf, restoring him to his previous prosperity. In fact, God would bless him with much greater prosperity than he'd had before (vv. 5–7).

Once again, we have an example of the wrong way to counsel someone in pain. Unfortunately, like Bildad, we sometimes lack care and grace when counseling a sufferer. If the truth be told, some are more concerned about defending their theological or philosophical positions than they are about following Christ's example of being a gentle servant of others.

Bildad could have humbled himself and really listened to what Job had said earlier: "Teach me, and I will be quiet" (6:24). But instead, he set off with his own agenda and became, with Eliphaz, an unwitting instrument in the hands of Satan to bring about even more torment to Job.

Ask Yourself . . . *What can I do to keep from coming across condemningly of other people?*

El Shaddai

El Shaddai is one of the Hebrew names of God, meaning "God Almighty." In the Hebrew text of Job 8:3, the writer used a poetic device to spread this name over two parallel lines to emphasize his point:

> Does *El* pervert justice?
> Does *Shaddai* pervert what is right?

Because the verbs used in both lines are identical, the two lines together may be understood as "Does *El Shaddai* pervert true judgment?"

Job 8:8–10:22 in Brief

In contrast to Eliphaz, who appealed to revelation in a dream, Bildad encouraged Job to seek the wisdom of ancient tradition (8:8–22). He continued his contention that God destroys the wicked but rescues the blameless. Job's suffering, in Bildad's eyes, was simple proof that he was not blameless. All he needed to do was to turn to God, and God would cheer him up.

To prove to Bildad that he was not ignorant of God's ways, Job described God's wisdom and power over nature (Job 9). Job said God is so powerful, in fact, that no one should dare even approach Him. Thus if Job tried to approach God to argue his innocence, he felt certain God would crush him. All he could do was to plead for mercy. "If only," he added, "there were someone to arbitrate between us" (v. 33). In these words of despair, Job's yearning perhaps foreshadowed the coming of Christ.

Meanwhile, since Job had no mediator, he decided to argue his own case (Job 10). He begged God not to find fault in him, especially since God's vision is superior to that of mortals. He asked why God would want to destroy him after going to all the trouble of creating him. To Job, it almost seemed as if God made him to condemn him—innocent or not. Once again, he said he wished he'd never been born, and asked for a short time of peace before going into the world of the dead.

d Zophar Rebukes Job (11:1–9)

Oh, how I wish that God would speak,
that he would open his lips against you
and disclose to you the secrets of wisdom,
for true wisdom has two sides.
—Job 11:5–6a

At the conclusion of Job's speech, Zophar, the third comforter, took the opportunity to have his say (v. 1). He went even further than Eliphaz and Bildad in condemning their friend. He implied that if Job, whom he thought was mocking God, had received the retribution he deserved, he would have been in even worse shape. Thus Zophar's rebuke climaxed the indictments brought against the suffering Job in this first cycle of speeches.

Zophar began his speech by scolding Job. He may have looked around the circle of friends before he asked if anyone else was going to respond to Job's outburst (v. 2). He couldn't believe the others were going to sit idly by while Job contradicted all their traditional religious values. Then showing no compassion at all, Zophar charged Job with idle talk and with taunting God (v. 3).

Zophar, like Eliphaz and Bildad before, was guilty of putting words into Job's mouth. One of the idle things Zophar understood Job to have said was that he was being punished by God even though he

was perfect (v. 4).

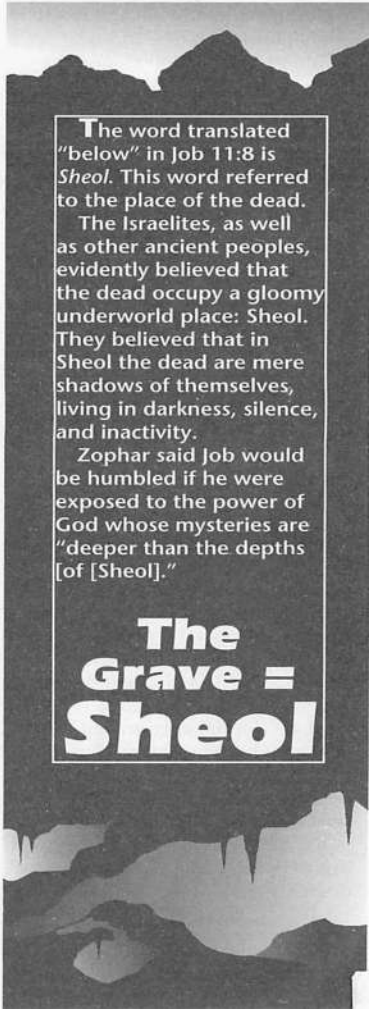
But Job had never claimed sinless perfection. All he had claimed was that, compared to the genuinely wicked, he was blameless and not deserving of such punishment (see 9:21–22). This was a far cry from claiming to be perfectly pure. Indeed, he had already admitted that he was sinful and in need of forgiveness (see 7:21).

Those words of Job seem to have gone over Zophar's head. And so Zophar rambled on, oblivious of Job's real needs, determined only to share his own weather-beaten theological views.

Ask Yourself . . . *What might I do to really listen to those who are telling me about their problems and troubles?*

There was something else Zophar presumed about Job that irritated him even more. In fact, it touched the very heart of Zophar's theology of sin and suffering. If Job were really a righteous man, then he would not be suffering the way he is right now, Zophar's thinking went. But since Job was suffering to such an extreme degree, this obviously meant that he had committed some terrible sins. Zophar evidently felt God should be punishing Job even more than He was doing. So he voiced his desire that God would speak out and defend Himself against Job, that He would reveal to Job the true essence of divine wisdom (11:5–6).

To emphasize his point that Job actually deserved worse, Zophar said, "Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin" (v. 6). Zophar's insinuation was that God was being merciful by not coming



down harder on Job for his sins. Zophar may have made this comment in response to Job's notion that God was stalking him, on the lookout for the slightest sin and ready to punish him for it (see 10:14).

Concerned that Job assumed a more thorough knowledge of God than he really possessed, Zophar continued his discourse by launching into a description of God's greatness (11:7–9). Perhaps Zophar thought that if Job were exposed to the infinite power of a God whose mysteries are "deeper than the depths of the grave" (v. 8), he might be humbled. He would not be able to do anything else but see his own finiteness and sinfulness, and then repent in fear and shame.

Ironically, Job would have been the first to tell Zophar that he agreed completely with Zophar's understanding of God's wisdom and might. But for now he decided to let Zophar ramble on.

Job 11:10–14:22 in Brief

Having completed his point about God's wisdom and might, Zophar expressed little hope for Job, comparing him to "deceitful men" (11:11) as well as to a "witless man" and "a wild donkey's colt" (v. 12). And yet Zophar encouraged Job to repent of his sins, saying that if he did so, God would respond to his cries and put an end to his suffering (vv. 13–20).

Job replied to Zophar by responding to the accusations of his counselors (12:1–13:19), and then he spoke directly to God, pleading for His mercy (13:20–14:22). Toward his three friends, Job's attitude was sarcastic. He suggested that when the counselors died, wisdom would die with them. Because they had dealt with his problem only superficially, he proceeded to define it in more depth. He asked why he, a righteous and blameless person, had become a laughingstock when the really evil people were left undisturbed and secure.

All of creation, Job went on to say, was vulnerable to suffering the same injustice. The bottom line was that God sent good or bad things to His creatures regardless of whether they were righteous. This was the real issue, and Job's friends had missed it. Refusing to recant his claim that he was a godly man, Job told his counselors that he would plead his case directly to the Lord, adding, "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (13:15).

On the basis of this hope, Job turned his appeal directly to God to clear him from wrongdoing. "Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?" he cried out to the Lord (v. 24). As he spoke to God, however, he became discouraged again and uttered a poem about the futility of human life on earth. Thus to Job it still seemed that death was the easiest way out of his predicament, especially so because of his hope of resurrection (14:14).

Job Answers His Friends' Counsel

Job 15–21

Job 15–18 in Brief

Job 15–21 presents the second cycle of speeches between Job and his three counselors. These speeches follow the same sequence as the first cycle: speeches by Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, each followed by a response from Job.

As we see in chapter 15, Eliphaz asked a series of questions, trying to shake Job out of what Eliphaz perceived as Job's arrogance. He appealed to the authority of tradition and then presented a series of frightening pictures that depict what happens to wicked people—clearly implying that Job was one of them.

Chapters 16 and 17 present Job's bitter response to Eliphaz. Once again he called his three friends "miserable comforters" (16:1), and then he turned his complaints toward God, claiming that the Lord had devastated his household and turned everyone against him. He hoped that his sufferings would not go unnoticed and appealed to an advocate in heaven. He gave in to his grief at the end of his speech, expressing his longing to die.

Bildad grew impatient with Job's orations, and chapter 18 features his reaction. He asked Job to stop his speeches and to be sensible. Following Eliphaz's example, Bildad went on to give an even more terrifying portrayal of the calamity that awaits wicked people—"Fire resides in his tent; burning sulfur is scattered over his dwelling" (18:15). Thus he implied that if Job refused to repent, Job's fate would be even worse than what he was presently experiencing.

Job's Impatience with His Counselors (19:1–6)

How long will you torment me
and crush me with words?
Ten times now you have
reproached me;
shamelessly you attack me.
—Job 19:2–3

Chapter 19, which features Job's reply to Bildad's second speech, includes what might be called four stanzas:

1. *Verses 1–6*. Job showed his impatience with his counselors.

2. *Verses 7–12.* Job felt abandoned and opposed by God.

3. *Verses 13–20.* Job questioned God about being alienated from his friends and family.

4. *Verses 21–29.* Job declared his hope in a Redeemer.

The first stanza of this chapter sums up what might be called Job's fifth persecution. His first persecution was the loss of his servants and property; the second, the loss of his children; the third, his physical suffering; the fourth, the foolishness of his wife; and the fifth, the ongoing torment of his counselors.

Prior to this point in Job's conversations with his friends, he was able to scoff at or show some indifference toward their advice. But after Bildad's cruel speech, he had apparently reached his limit. In anguish, Job cried out to Bildad, "How long will you torment me and crush me with words?" (vv. 1–2).

He claimed that his comforters had reproached him ten times with no cause, and that they had attacked him without shame (v. 3). By saying "ten times," Job probably was not referring to the actual number of incidents in which his friends had rebuked him. More likely he was indicating his feeling that his counselors had turned against him completely. While desiring some sort of pity from these friends of his, Job had received, instead, their condemnation.

What we see portrayed here is how damaging words can be in a counseling context. This is especially true in regard to people who are suffering. Contrary to Satan when he brought the devastation earlier, the comforters did not lift a finger against Job. But their words brought him great pain—perhaps greater mental and emotional anguish than that produced by all else that had happened to Job.

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I be more sensitive with the words I say to other people, especially when I feel these people are in the wrong?*

This Assyrian relief sculpture shows one way that nets were used in hunting. Referring to the way he believed God had unjustly wronged him, Job said God had snared him in a net.

In spite of feeling tormented by his comforters, Job did not go so far as to give up. In fact, he told them to mind their own business—"My error remains my concern alone" (v. 4). He accused them of exalting themselves at his expense and of seizing on his sad condition for their attacks against him (v. 5).

It's noteworthy that Job's apparent accusation in verse 6 is premised by the condition ("if") of his counselors' being exalted above him. Job knew that a God who would exalt these men while unjustly punishing him would be unjust and wrong. Referring to a part of a hunter's equipment, Job said God had "drawn his net around" him (v. 6).

Evidently Job was attempting to answer Bildad's earlier rhetorical question: "Does God pervert justice?" (8:3). In effect, Job declared that if it's simply a matter of good being rewarded and sin punished, then God must be unjust—because they had no reason to be exalted above righteous Job.

Like any of us, Job did not know God's plan. Hence, he had only an incomplete picture. We should be able to sympathize with his anger when we realize the suffering he was experiencing. Nevertheless, the text suggests we need to look at Job's statements not as an attack on God but rather as an indictment of his friends' skewed theology.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I plead my case before God—as Job did—when I am angry or upset with the experiences of my life?*

Job's Sense of Victimization (19:7–12)

He has blocked my way so I cannot pass;
he has shrouded my paths in darkness.
He has stripped me of my honor and removed the crown from my head.

—Job 19:8–9

As Job continued his response to Bildad, he expressed his feelings in two ways. First, he felt isolated from God (v. 7). Second, he felt as though God Himself was opposed to him and attacking him with an army (vv. 8–12).

Of course, Job's feeling of isolation is understandable. He knew he had lived a basically righteous life, and yet he had been struck down. God had been his friend, his sense of security. Now God seemed to be his enemy, exposing him to all sorts of danger. Even though he had boldly cried out for justice, he had gotten no response.

Ask Yourself . . . *Are there times when I feel as if I'm isolated from God—even as if God is ignoring me? If so, what brings about those feelings?*

Next, Job compared his situation to being under attack by an army. Job depicted a scene in which he dramatized his feeling that God was at war with him. One thing that's interesting about these verses is that Job described the events of this war

in reverse order. Thus if verses 8–12 are read from end to beginning, we can follow in sequence a successful military campaign in all its drama and detail:

- While Job was camped in his tent, God's troops surrounded and laid siege to his dwelling (v. 12).
- God's anger built against Job, whom He considered His enemy (v. 11).
- The army of the Lord attacked and destroyed Job's once-secure dwelling place (v. 10).
- Having captured Job, God's forces humiliated him by stripping him of his crown and honor (v. 9).
- Finally, the troops under God's command confined Job's movements, thus making him a prisoner of war (v. 8).

Ask Yourself . . . *Are there times when I feel as though God is waging war against me? If so, what brings about those feelings?*

Many of the details in Job's depiction of battle echo what he had said earlier or what he would say later. For example, his portrayal of being held captive (v. 8) is similar to 3:23, which records Job's expression of feeling as though God had hedged him in. Another time Job complained, "You fasten my feet in shackles" (13:27).

In more than one of his speeches, Job referred to himself as a king. In 19:9 Job said God had removed a crown from his head. Here, Job said he felt like a king who had been conquered by God's forces. Job again compared himself to a king when he stated, "I chose the way for them and sat as their chief; I dwelt as a king among his troops; I was like one who comforts mourners" (29:25).

Apparently Job was growing more and more hopeless in his situation. To him, it was as though God had diminished his hope just as swiftly and as powerfully as He could uproot a tree (19:10).

C Job's Feeling of Alienation from Others (19:13–20)

He has alienated my family from me;
my acquaintances are completely estranged from me.
My relatives have gone away;
my closest friends have forgotten me.

—Job 19:13–14

Another source of severe suffering for Job was his sense of alienation from other people. He stood alone in the world, it seemed. No one was willing to defend his actions before God's apparent judgment, and his alienation from others appeared all the more to be a betrayal.

Job was at his lowest point of despair now, feeling as alienated and lonely and tired of it all as at any point in the story of his struggle. In fact, his feeling of isolation may cause us to remember Jesus' words of desperation from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you for-

The Skin of My Teeth

Most people are familiar with the expression "by the skin of my teeth." We may even have used the phrase recently. The expression means to barely get by, to make it through a narrow escape.

Many people do not know, however, that the phrase originated with the King James translation of Job 19:20, in which Job declared, "I am escaped with the skin of my teeth." Bible interpreters have assigned different meanings to this expression. Many believe it means that because of Job's illness, he had lost all of his teeth and only his gums were left. Others say that his sickness had made him shrivel up until he was only a shadow of his former self—that is, he had barely survived. At least one interpreter has translated the phrase as follows: "I gnaw myself on the skin with my teeth."

saken me?" (Matt. 27:46; see also Ps. 22:1).

From the onset of his misery to this point in the story, Job had been searching for anyone—even one person—to stand up for him. But it seemed everyone was gone. To dramatize his alienation further, he listed the people who had abandoned him. These included his family and acquaintances (Job 19:13), his relatives and friends (v. 14), his guests and female servants (v. 15), his personal servant (v. 16), his wife and brothers (v. 17), little boys who mock him (v. 18), and his most intimate friends (v. 19). Job was terribly alone.

Ask Yourself . . . *Who do I turn to when I feel abandoned? Why do I turn to that person?*

Though due the honor and respect of a mature man, Job's horrible disease brought him scorn and disrespect. When Job was denied one of the common courtesies of ancient society—youngsters' respect for their elders—he must have known that he had sunk from a position of utmost respectability to that of a pitiful outcast. Those bound to serve him avoided him, and those whom he thought loved him and enjoyed his companionship refused to give him their solace and affection.

Job summed up his miserable state by declaring bitterly that he was all alone with his deteriorated body. No doubt due to his illness, he had lost so much weight that he was down to just skin and bones. Evidently he had lost his teeth as

well, due to the disease, so that all he had left in his mouth were toothless gums (v. 20).

d Job's Hope in a Redeemer (19:21–29)

I know that my redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God.
—Job 19:25–26

"Have pity on me, my friends," Job pleaded, hoping the description of his isolation would finally soften the hardened hearts of the three comforters (v. 21). Of course, this was not the first time that Job had pleaded for their pity. He had appealed for their devotion in an earlier speech (see 6:14). What Job wanted was their friendship and compassion. What he was getting instead was their theological and philosophical bantering.

So Job complained to his comforters that they were attacking him even as God was (19:22). In Job's mind, his counselors were trying to take on the role of God as judge. This can especially be seen in Eliphaz's earlier assumption that he was speaking for God: "Are God's consolations [referring to the words of his counselors] not enough for you, words spoken gently to you?" (15:11).

Certainly Job's friends were not having the effect with their words they thought they should have. Rather than comforting Job or causing him to seek God's mercy, their words were being annoying and destructive. In a way, these men were eating at Job. So Job asked them, "Will you never get enough of my flesh?" (19:22), using a Semitic expression in which devouring someone's flesh referred to slander.

With death seemingly a certainty, Job cried out for the means to make a permanent record of his life. Yearning for a long-lasting way to defend his integrity, Job expressed his desire to write his words on a scroll, chisel them in lead, or engrave them in rock (vv. 23–24). That way, those who came after him

God: Redeemer of the Oppressed

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God is often seen as the *ga'al*, or the redeemer, of oppressed, weak peoples. For instance, in Proverbs 23:10–11, God's role is described in these words: "Do not move an ancient

boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the fatherless, for their Defender [*ga'al*] is strong; he will take up their case against you." In the Psalms, God is noted as the redeemer of those who die: "Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems [*ga'al*] your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion" (Ps. 103:2–4).

would know and believe in his case, and perhaps he would ultimately be vindicated, even if it was long after he was gone.

After many sorrowful expressions of hopelessness, Job then uttered perhaps the greatest words of hope recorded in Job. In the heart of his deepest despair, when all his loved ones had deserted him, Job expressed faith in one last hope—an even greater hope than having his life written on a scroll. This was hope in a Redeemer, one who would stand on earth to defend him (vv. 25–27). Though Job did not spell out any details of his resurrection, he clearly believed it would happen because of the Redeemer's intervention: "I myself will see him with my own eyes" (v. 27).

Bible scholars believe that the idea of an advocate—someone to champion our case before God—was prevalent in Job's day. The Hebrew word for "redeemer," *ga'al*, at times referred to a "blood avenger," a member of a victim's family who had the responsibility to obtain justice from the person who killed his relative. The motive of the redeemer, as it would have been in Job's case, was not revenge but justice.

Job clearly saw himself as the victim, the one who figuratively had been murdered, and he was calling for a Redeemer to stand in for him in the court of justice. Later, he would learn that it was God Himself who was his Redeemer, Friend, and Provider.

At this point in Job's life, having

God reveal Himself as his Redeemer was his heart's great yearning. We need not reach a desperate point in our lives to know that our Redeemer lives and that He is supporting us. But like Job, we will find that it is good to yearn for God and His love and mercy with all our heart.

Ask Yourself . . . *What effect does knowing that I have a Redeemer have on my daily life?*

At the end of this speech of Job's, he turned his words directly to his friends, warning them that because they had misjudged him, they would be judged more severely (vv. 28–29). Job realized that even after his inspired illumination about a Redeemer, his friends were still mired in their traditionalist views. Thus they would continue to "hound" (v. 28), or pursue, him, trying to convince him of the error of his ways.

Job stubbornly held that his ways were not in error, and he warned his friends that because of their persistent error, they were bringing about their own "punishment by the sword" (v. 29). Job's desire for his counselors to be punished shows that he still had a glimmer of hope that there could be some measure of justice in the world.

Job 20–21 in Brief

Recorded in Job 20–21 is the last exchange between Zophar and Job. Zophar may have been moved by what Job said about a Redeemer. But instead of linking his feelings with his thoughts and responding to Job in a meaningful way, he gave a rather irrelevant one-point lecture on how the wicked are doomed even though their destruction may not happen right away. What is awful about the vivid portraits of evil, greed, and selfishness that Zophar painted is that they were intended to describe Job.

Job responded by asking his comforters to listen to him one more time, even though his quarrel now was with God and not with them. If they didn't like what he was saying, then they could mock him.

First, he presented his argument once again that the wicked thrive in life without being punished, and that this happens even though they deny God's existence. Of course, the wicked die, just as do the righteous, and they are buried in the same dirt, and their bodies are eaten by the same worms.

Basically, Job again tried to be absolutely honest before God and probe deeply into the problems of evil and suffering, thereby cutting through the superficial nonsense of his three friends.

4 Job Reviews His Righteous Life

Job 22–31

Job 22–30 in Brief

The chapters of Job covered in this lesson include the third and final cycle of speeches. Eliphaz and Bildad both spoke, with Job responding to each of them. Zophar did not speak in this last cycle of speeches; no explanation is given for why he did not speak.

Eliphaz seems to have finally lost patience with Job, and he blamed Job's woes on Job's great and endless wickedness (as Eliphaz saw it). Yet Eliphaz also said that all Job had to do to regain peace and prosperity was to submit to God's will (Job 22).

Job responded by saying that he wanted to talk to God directly, even though it seemed to him that God was nowhere to be found. He felt both confident and terrified, trusting that he could withstand God's judgment, and yet knowing God could do as He pleased (Job 23).

Job then probed God's providence over earthly matters more deeply. *Why,* he wondered, *does God do nothing when everyday acts of injustice lead to poverty and misery? Why does God allow the wicked to get away with cruelty and immorality?* Despite these questions, Job held on to his conviction that someday God would bring justice to both the righteous and the wicked (Job 24).

In his brief reply to Job's words, Bildad observed that, compared to the great and righteous God, humanity is little more than a maggot or worm (Job 25).

To this, Job reacted sarcastically, going on to reaffirm his innocence in the eyes of God and arguing once again that the fate of the wicked is to die by God's hand (Job 26–27).

Chapter 28, which some consider an interruption in the flow of speeches, has been called the "Hymn to Wisdom." It reveals that wisdom cannot be bought or discovered and is found only in God, who declared, "The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding" (v. 28).

Chapters 29–31 provide Job's final defense against his noncomforting comforters. In these chapters he compared the past, when everyone honored him, to his present state of disgrace, when he could think only of dying.

a Job Denies Lust, Deceit, Adultery (31:1–12)

Let God weigh me in honest scales and he will know that I am blameless.

—Job 31:6

Chapter 31 records Job's completion of his case before God. In vivid terms he sought to demonstrate his innocence once and for all by explaining how he had refrained from committing acts of wickedness and how he had performed deeds of righteousness.

Job's first claim to purity was in the area of avoiding lust (vv. 1–4). He stated that he had made a covenant with his own eyes

Ashtoreth was a pagan mother goddess and fertility goddess of the Canaan region, prominent from the second millennium B.C., and yet still plaguing Israel in Solomon's era (1 Kings 11:5).
Illustration by Bob de la Peña

Fertility Goddesses in the Ancient World

In declaring his practice of avoiding lustful stares, Job used a word (translated "girl" in Job 31:1) that was sometimes used of pagan goddesses. This is one fact that has led some Bible commentators to conclude that Job was perhaps alluding to the fact that he did not participate in the worship of fertility goddesses. There were numerous fertility goddesses worshiped throughout the ancient world. As early as the second millennium B.C., and for centuries afterward (certainly in Job's time), these idols had their followings. The Old Testament mentions *Astarte, Anat,* "Ashtoreth" (see Judg. 2:13), *Ishtar,* and the "Queen of Heaven" (see Jer. 7:18; 44:17-19). Also, God, in Deuteronomy 16:21, warns the Hebrews against worshiping Asherah.

The worship of fertility goddesses often involved lewd practices. So Job would have known that anyone engaging in such idolatry would also be guilty of immorality.

not to look lustfully at women (v. 1). In this Job was already obeying what Jesus would later command in the Sermon on the Mount—"I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28).

Job explained that sexual immorality leads to ruin and disaster—the wicked person's "heritage from the Almighty" (Job 31:2, 3). Furthermore, there's no hope to escape divine judgment by hiding one's wrongdoing, for God sees all that we do or think (v. 4).

Ask Yourself. . . *Am I really willing to purpose in my heart not to look lustfully at others?*

As Job moved on to his next topic for self-defense, he used an approach that he would use several more times. This took the form of saying, "If I am guilty of such-and-such a sin, may such-and-such a punishment be done to me." In this case the approach is used with the subject of deceit in business practices (vv. 5–8).

Job described the sins he had *not* committed in terms of his feet, heart, and hands (vv. 5, 7). None of these parts of his body had been engaged in deceit.

Job interrupted the list of sins by inviting God to weigh him on honest scales (v. 6). Since scales in Job's day were sometimes adjusted to cheat, this expression was appropriate in light of the present topic.

If Job was guilty of corrupt business practices, he offered to have all his crops harvested by others or uprooted. This would be a suitable punishment.

This sculpture shows Assyrians using scales. Job invited God to weigh him on honest scales so that the Lord would know that he was blameless.

As we read through these verses, we can't help comparing Job's high standards to our own. How would our business practices balance on Job's scales? In Job we see a man of God who sought to live his life according to ethical standards that were quite high, even by the standards later taught by Jesus.

Ask Yourself . . . *By what standards do I evaluate my own behavior in the workplace?*

Job then returned to the theme of immorality, this time denying that he had committed adultery (vv. 9–12). He declared that he had never been seduced by or been the seducer of another man's wife (v. 9).

Job vowed to give his wife away as a servant and a concubine if he was known to have ever committed adultery (v. 10). So confident was Job in his purity that he could vow

to undergo the utmost humiliation if he could be found guilty of even one count of sexual immorality.

Job added a brief commentary on the sinfulness and destructiveness of adultery (v. 11–12). He said adultery is shameful and that God has every right to render judgment against such behavior. He also compared its destructiveness to burning and to having a crop uprooted just before it was to be harvested.

Many a guilty wife or husband can attest that adultery has the power to destroy everything one has worked for. On the level of society, too, we can see the terrible destruction the epidemic of adultery has caused. Christians can have a positive influence by reaffirming our opposition to adultery: "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure" (Heb. 13:4).

b Job Denies Injustice, Miserliness, Idolatry (31:13–28)

For I dreaded destruction from God,
and for fear of his splendor I could not do such things.
—Job 31:23

Job's next claims of purity were somewhat more public than his claims not to have lusted, been deceitful, or committed adultery. Verses 13–28 record the kind and thoughtful ways Job had treated others, as well as how he had shunned greed and idolatry.

For Job's first example of ways he was considerate of others, he referred to his treatment of his servants (vv. 13–15). He claimed to have always reacted justly to his servants when they had come to him with a complaint (v. 13). He knew that if he had not done so, God would call him to account for his actions (v. 14). Job also noted that his servants deserved such treatment from him because he and they were created equal by God. The Lord formed both Job and his servants in the same way in their mothers' wombs (v. 15).

The writer of Proverbs expressed the same sentiment: "Rich and poor have this in common: The Lord is the Maker of them all" (Prov. 22:2).

Throughout history, human beings have had a hard time treating those at lower social or economic levels with the respect they deserve as fellow creations of God. And yet, as Job expressed, doing so is a good and godly action. Our behavior and attitude toward those who serve us is one indication of the Holy Spirit's working in our lives.

Ask Yourself . . . How might I improve on the way I respond to people who wait on me or serve me in some manner?

Job's kindness and consideration touched not only those within his household, but those outside of it as well. He made it a lifelong practice to take care of the needs of the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the inadequately clothed (vv. 16–23).

Those who suffered poverty in ancient times tended to be the fatherless, the widows, and the landless aliens. They depended on the charity of others. Job was generous in helping them. For example, when the poor begged alms, he gave (v. 16).

Job knew he had plenty of food to fill his own stomach, and so he willingly shared his bread with orphans. But he went a step further and became a substitute father for some of the fatherless children (vv. 17–18). Furthermore, he did not physically abuse them, even though he could have gotten away with it because of his personal clout (v. 21).

In addition, he assisted widows, apparently guiding them through the crowded marketplace and perhaps aiding them financially as well (vv. 16, 18).

Job also provided warm homemade clothing for those who might otherwise have perished in the cold. At least one needy man to whom Job gave clothing blessed him for his act of generosity (vv. 19–20).

After listing these acts of kindness, Job again uttered an oath. He said that if he had been unkind to the disadvantaged, then "let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint" (v. 22). Again, this would have been a suitable punishment for one who would raise his arm to strike orphans.

These verses give us a more intimate glimpse of Job than perhaps we have been given before. Now we see why he was considered "blameless and upright" (1:1). We can't help but be drawn to him. He was kind and likable. He was the type of person one would love to have for a neighbor.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do my neighbors feel about me the way Job's neighbors had previously felt about him?*

Job did not fail to mention God's influence in his practice of doing good. One of the things that drove Job to be concerned for others less fortunate than himself was his respect for and fear of God (31:23). And yet part of his confusion was that now, even after doing so much good, he still seemed to have encountered God's wrath. To Job, God seemed to be punishing him without reason.

Job's next claim for purity was based on the fact that he never placed confidence in his great wealth or raised its importance too high (vv. 24–25). Job realized that to have done so would have been to deny God the worship that was due Him, and to worship something else in His place. Job knew that wealth was temporary, as was now altogether evident in his own case. The only one he could place his confidence in was God, and that confidence too seemed to be failing him at this point in his life.

Just as Job had not placed any confidence in his wealth, he also had not placed any confidence in the objects worshiped by others in his day. As another claim to purity, Job said he had not been tempted to commit idolatry (vv. 26–28). Never once did he sin by offering the heav-

enly bodies—the sun and moon—"a kiss of homage" (vv. 26–27).

If Job had been guilty of greed (a form of idolatry) as well as conventional idolatry, then he would have deserved judgment (v. 28). By way of explanation, Job equated greed and idolatry with unfaithfulness to God (v. 28).

In his kind acts to friends, servants, and strangers, in his attitude toward money and possessions, and in his refusal to worship anything or anyone other than God, Job remained pure. And his purity made his disastrous circumstances all the more confusing.

C Job Denies Gloating, Inhospitality, Hypocrisy, Exploitation (31:29–40)

Oh, that I had someone to hear me!
I sign now my defense—let the Almighty answer me;
let my accuser put his indictment in writing.
I would give him an account of my every step;
I would present it to him as to a ruler.

—Job 31:35, 37

Job concluded his final speech by making more claims of purity and by pleading with God to render a verdict. Continuing to build the case for his righteousness, Job argued that he was not tarnished by harboring bitterness toward his enemies. He had not been happy about any misfortunes befalling them, nor had he cursed them in retribution for any act they had committed against him (vv. 29–30).

Once again, Job's example, which follows Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, is a challenge. Christians, like unbelievers, are often weighed down with bitterness toward people in their place of employment, church, or hometown. The life of Job challenges us to truly strive to follow Jesus' call to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44).

Ask Yourself . . . Am I willing to call on God to help me overcome my bitterness toward a certain person?

As a reminder of his goodwill to others, Job briefly echoed what he had mentioned earlier—that his servants always had enough to eat (Job 31:31; compare v. 13) and that he was always hospitable to strangers (v. 32; compare vv. 16–21). Indeed, because his kindness and hospitality had become widely known, it is likely that many travelers made it a point to spend the night at Job's home and to partake of his generosity.

Job's next claim to purity was that he had not been insincere or double-minded (vv. 33–34). In essence, he had always been straight with people about his moral failings. He did not try to conceal his sins from others, but rather freely confessed them.

At this point in Job's long speech,

he exploded with a plea to God—"Oh, that I had someone to hear me!" (v. 35). He had shown evidence of a righteous lifestyle, and yet his terrible suffering continued unabated. "Where is God?" he seems to have been crying out. "Where is His sense of justice, which my comforters have so verbosely explained to me?"

Job was willing to put his own signature on his defense if only God would take up his case and give him an answer. If only his accuser would write out his indictment, listing what he had done to deserve such misery, he would gladly admit to and display the accusations in public by wearing it as one would wear a badge or a crown (vv. 35–36).

As part of his plea to God asking for a reason for his suffering, Job said, "I sign now my defense" (v. 35). Literally, Job was putting down his *taw* (ת)—the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet—his "mark" or "signature."

No matter how God responded to Job's plea, Job would not feel guilty. He had gone out of his way to demonstrate how he had lived a life of righteousness. He would not have any trouble giving an account of all his thoughts and actions. Indeed, Job claimed he would be willing to approach God as a prince might approach a king and ruler, who was

Putting Out the Welcome Mat

In Bible times, when the speed of land transportation never exceeded the pace of a horse or camel, anyone traveling more than about 20 miles could plan on at least one overnight. Inns were few and often had poor reputations, so travelers generally either had to sleep outdoors (a sometimes dangerous proposition) or else hope for an invitation from a stranger to sleep in a house. Suffering Job claimed that in his better days he had been a householder of the generous, welcoming type (Job 31:32).

Hospitality was a virtue promoted by the Old Testament, as it was in ancient culture generally. Biblical examples of hospitality abound. For example, the patriarch Abraham once handsomely entertained three visitors, who turned out to be visitors from heaven (Gen. 18:1-8). And later, Abraham's nephew Lot took in two of these same visitors (19:1–3).

The New Testament carries on the Old Testament's promotion of hospitality. The writer of Hebrews urged believers, "Do not forget to entertain strangers" (Heb. 13:2).

A head of barley. Job said that if he had cheated the workers on his farmland, then weeds should grow in his fields in place of barley.

also the prince's father (v. 37). After the brief interlude recorded in verses 35–37, in which Job pleaded for God to give him an answer, Job returned to his claims of purity. This time he said that if his land were given a voice, even it would not accuse him of exploitation (v. 38). Going a step further, Job explained that he had never cheated his land's reapers out of their hire, nor the land's tenants out of their share of the crop (v. 39).

Climaxing his litany of *if*s and *then*s, he made a vow. If his claims of freedom from gloating, inhospitality, hypocrisy, and exploitation were not true, then only weeds and briers should grow in the fields that had yielded the wheat that had fed him, his family, and those whom he had cared for (v. 40).

In this way Job ended his speech, perhaps thinking that the debate with his friends was over. But then a young man, who had joined the circle and had remained silent up to this point, decided to speak. Now it was Elihu's turn to have his say.

5 Elihu Joins the Debate

Job 32–37

a Elihu Becomes Angry (32:1–5)

Elihu . . . became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God. He was also angry with the three friends, because they had found no way to refute Job, and yet had condemned him.

—Job 32:2–3

After the cycles of speeches by Job and his three friends, there comes a speech by a new character: Elihu. This speech is prefaced by a brief narrative (vv. 1–5) in which the author introduces Elihu, a young man whose name means "My God is He." (This name is also mentioned in 1 Samuel 1:1 as Samuel's great-grandfather, though this Elihu would almost certainly have to be a different person.) Elihu apparently lived in the desert land of Buz, but now he was in the land of Uz to visit Job. Though there is no mention of him in the first 31 chapters of Job, he had apparently been quietly listening to the speeches of Job and the three friends all along.

Job's last speech had convinced Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar not that Job was righteous, but that Job was unpersuadable because he *believed* he was righteous (Job 32:1). Thus they gave up their efforts to convince Job of his sinfulness. As all four of the other men fell silent, Elihu grew angry enough to finally speak out. Three times his anger is pointed out (vv. 2–3, 5).

First, Elihu was angry at Job. To Elihu, Job had spent much time and many words "justifying himself rather than God" (v. 2). In Elihu's eyes, Job had overlooked his sin of spiritual pride. If he had possessed more humility, Elihu seems to have felt, Job would have tried to explain why God was right in allowing his suffering, rather than trying to prove that he was blameless.

Elihu was also angry at Job's three friends. These men didn't have the perception to point out this one area of weakness in Job. They had failed to refute Job's claims even though they condemned him for his sinfulness (v. 3). And what's more, they had given up on their effort to convince Job of his sinfulness. This, too, infuriated Elihu (v. 5).

It's interesting that Elihu doesn't seem to have minded that these

Elihu: Proud Fool or Wise Advocate?

Elihu gave the longest speech recorded in the Book of Job—four verses longer than even Job's longest speech. Many commentators have described Elihu as showing the characteristics of an arrogant and angry young man. One writer remarked that Elihu's introduction in the Book of Job is, by our standards, "almost ludicrous in its brashness."

Others argue that Elihu played a central role in the drama surrounding Job's disastrous circumstances. One commentator goes so far as to suggest that Elihu was an advocate for the wise and loving providence of God and was the most acute theologian of them all.

In fact, Elihu did demonstrate that Job had overlooked the possibility that suffering may be permitted by the Lord for wise and benevolent purposes (such as discipline and teaching), and that the only proper response of a true servant of God is uncomplaining submission.

older counselors had argued with a hurting man who'd lost everything. The fact that he, like Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, overlooked Job's condition reveals his own insensitivity from the beginning. What was foremost in his mind was that the trio had tried to make a case against Job without effectively countering any of his arguments.

The friends' lack of ability in arguing really bothered Elihu, especially since they were all his elders and supposedly wiser than himself. In fact, the reason Elihu had until this point hesitated to speak out was because Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar were all older than he (v. 4). By waiting to have his turn to speak, he was merely showing respect to his elders as was customary in the ancient Near East, as it still is today in that part of the world.

Elihu's problem was that the more he listened to the speeches of these men, including Job, the more angry he became. And now that Job was finished and the other three men had nothing more to say, Elihu was ready to jump in and dispense his own wisdom to the others.

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I able to keep calm during a discussion with others, listening carefully while waiting for an opportunity to speak?*

b Elihu Speaks Out (32:6–22)

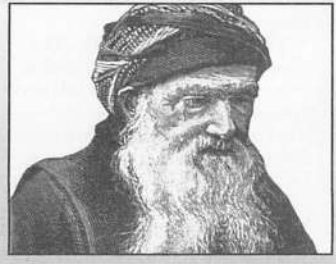
I must speak and find relief;
I must open my lips and reply.
I will show no partiality,
nor will I flatter anyone;
for if I were skilled in flattery,
my Maker would soon take me away.

—Job 32:20–22

Before Elihu moved into the main theme of his speech, he took quite some time to introduce the speech itself. He wanted his hearers to understand the motivation for his words before he attempted to convince them of the error of their arguments. Seventeen verses of chapter 32 are devoted to his introduction, as are the first seven verses of chapter 33. In some respects, his introduction covers two dozen verses in order to say, "Look out! I'm going to speak now."

But to be fair to Elihu, we also need to consider the ancient and admired practice in which orators used the most eloquent speech possible to introduce and present their points. From a rhetorical standpoint, this was Elihu's intent.

Elihu modestly explained that he had remained silent for so long because of his age. He was apparently much younger than Job and the three friends. Showing himself to be respectful of their age and experience, Elihu admitted to being fearful of speaking up any earlier. But now he seemed to have been given his opportunity, and he did not want to pass it up. What Elihu would say, according to his own words, would not be based on mere opinion, but on something much firmer, namely, his knowledge (32:6).



WHEN AGE WAS TO BE HONORED

Ancient peoples in the Near East made it their custom to respect and honor their elders. Because age was considered to involve the accumulation of wisdom, the elderly were often sought out for their advice. The Israelites certainly were taught to honor the elderly, as is demonstrated in these Bible passages:

- "Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God" (Lev. 19:32).
- "The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old" (Prov. 20:29).

Elihu held to the view that "age should speak; advanced years should teach wisdom" (v. 7). But his own experience had taught him to modify that view somewhat. He had come to realize that it wasn't age alone that brought wisdom, but that God also granted wisdom and understanding to the young when He chose to do so (v. 8). Thus "it is not only the old who are wise, not only the aged who understand what is right" (v. 9).

Through these words, Elihu provided himself a foundation from which to speak. If Job and his counselors could agree that God is the Giver of wisdom, then perhaps Elihu, though a young man, should be given his say. Elihu, on the other hand, left open his own claim to have received wisdom from God. Therefore, he seized the time to speak and established that the time for his elders to listen had arrived. Grouping himself with those older than he and comparing his wisdom to theirs, Elihu said, "Listen to me; I too will tell you what I know" (v. 10).

Noticeably, Elihu stepped carefully into the discussion. In case his elders thought he was being a bit brash, he reminded them again of how he had waited while they had spoken and of how he had listened attentively to their arguments (v. 11). In fact, he claimed to have given them his full attention (vv. 11–12). But having done so, Elihu had reached the conclusion that neither Eliphaz nor Bildad nor Zophar had proven Job's philosophy wrong. These three men, at least in Elihu's mind, had failed to answer Job's arguments.

Elihu went on to give Job's counselors a warning. Just because they in their so-called wisdom had failed to break through Job's defenses did not mean that it could not be done. Elihu cautioned them not to give up

By What Authority, Elihu?

Some Bible scholars have pointed out that the different characters in the Book of Job claim to speak by different authorities. For instance, Job implied at one point that he spoke by the authority of a life of wisdom and of reverence to God (Job 28:28). Eliphaz claimed his authority to speak came from a dream (4:12–21). Bildad relied mostly on tradition for his words (8:8–9), and Zophar on commonsense rationalism (11:5–6).

What about Elihu? Elihu claimed his authority came from divine inspiration: "It is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that gives him understanding" (32:8).

and defer to God the responsibility of refuting Job (v. 13). Elihu did not want the comforters to affirm the complexity of Job's argument by saying, "No mere human being can convince Job otherwise; only God can do it."

Elihu was saying that not all wisdom had been expressed. Why? Because Job and he had not yet engaged in dialogue. When Elihu spoke to Job, he intended to take an entirely different approach than the others had (v. 14). Elihu implied that the approach taken by Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar was inferior to the one he would take.

Elihu, who had been speaking to Job's counselors, apparently now turned his attention to Job. Referring to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, Elihu told Job that these men had become dismayed with Job's arguments and no longer could think of anything to say to him (v. 15).

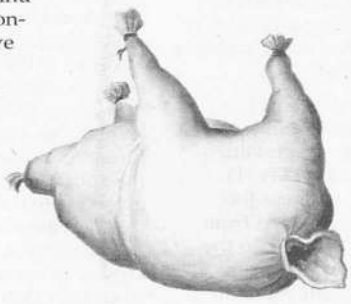
This left only Elihu to reply to Job. So Elihu asked Job, "Must I wait, now that they are silent, now that they stand there with no reply?" (v. 16). No, Elihu would not wait. He continued, "I too will have my say; I too will tell what I know" (v. 17).

Feeling animated to speak, Elihu admitted that he was "full of words" (v. 18). Indeed, he was bursting with words, so much so that the image of overfilled wineskins came to his mind (v. 19). The words he wanted to say had built up inside him and had to come out. The only way for him to have relief was to speak (v. 20).

Following the custom of rhetoric, Elihu promised to be absolutely fair and impartial with his words. He said he would refrain from flattering or showing partiality to anyone—to Job, to his three comforters, or even to God (v. 21). This degree of impartiality was something Job had earlier requested from his counselors (13:7–11).

Elihu wanted Job to know that he would be expressing his thoughts openly and honestly. In fact, he pointed out that even if he were skilled in flattery, to use flattery to win the influence of others would deserve God's punishment (32:22).

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I sometimes use flattery to manipulate other people's opinions of me?*



In Job's day, wine and other fluids were often kept in animal skins. Describing how anxious he was to speak, Elihu said, "Inside I am . . . like new wineskins ready to burst" (Job 32:19).

C Elihu Scolds Job (33:1–12)

I tell you, in this you are not right, for God is greater than any mortal.
—Job 33:12

Continuing the introduction to his speech, Elihu prepared Job for what he was about to say. Elihu would soon begin scolding Job for complaining about the way God was treating him. But before Elihu did so, he strove to convince Job of his righteous and honest intent.

Unlike Job's three comforters, Elihu included in the introduction to his speech a personal note. He actually called Job by name, something Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar never did in their speeches. Apparently, these friends' relationship with Job was too formal for them to make use of his name. Whereas they approached Job in a distant manner, Elihu approached him in a personable and friendly manner.

Ask Yourself . . . Do I care enough about new acquaintances to find out their names when talking with them, or do I typically treat them as if I wished to remain aloof from them?

Confident of the worth of the words he would speak, Elihu instructed Job to pay careful attention to everything he said (v. 1). Elihu implied that, whereas Job could afford to be distracted from time to time while listening to the speeches of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, he must be diligently alert for the words of wisdom Elihu was about to pour forth.

After sitting in silence for so long, Elihu was anxious to speak (v. 2; compare 32:18–20). Ironically, however, he had spent much time and energy setting up the introduction to his speech, rather than just coming out with it.

Nonetheless, Elihu wanted Job to know that he planned to be absolutely straight with him. He promised Job his sincerity and that his words were arising from "an upright heart" (33:3). He also promised to speak about that which he knew. Thus his words, he said once again, were based upon knowledge and wisdom, not upon his personal opinion (compare 32:6, 10, 17).

Elihu undoubtedly felt the need to stress his sincerity up front because he was aware that Job had lost confidence in the sincerity of the three friends. Earlier, he had heard Job lash out at the counselors: "You . . . smear me with lies; you are worthless physicians, all of you! If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom" (13:4–5). "Miserable comforters are you all! Will your long-winded speeches never end? What ails you that you keep on arguing?" (16:2–3).

Perhaps Elihu was also trying to level the playing field for Job and himself. He alluded to the fact that the Spirit of God had created and given life to both Job and himself (33:4, 6; compare Gen. 2:7). And he encouraged Job to prepare an answer to confront anything he would say (Job 33:5).

"Prepare yourself and confront me." Elihu used this phrase to challenge Job to debate. In Hebrew, the phrase means "to set things in order," that is, to arrange military troops so that they are prepared for battle. Elihu was ready to do verbal battle with Job, and to do so as his equal.

Of course, Elihu's words seem to carry at least a slight tinge of superiority as well. After advising Job to formulate an answer to his speech, Elihu added, "If you can." He also seemed to be propping himself up by telling Job that he had nothing to fear in confronting the younger man's wisdom and intellect (v. 7). Curiously, Elihu told Job, "Nor should my hand be heavy upon you"—a phrase previously used only in reference to God (compare 13:21; 23:2). Elihu seems to have been saying, "In spite of my superior intelligence and wisdom, don't be afraid of me. We can discuss this matter as equals."

It's hard for us to know how to take Elihu. If a person younger than we and with less experience approached us to ask, "Want some advice?" and then added, "Oh, don't be afraid of me—I'm human like you are," how might we respond? Perhaps our first reaction would be to say, "Who do you think you are?"

But the case of Elihu is perhaps a different situation. Maybe Job was ready to listen to another voice for a while, especially one that addressed him by name and tried to assure him that he was sincere and nonthreatening. Perhaps if we ourselves ever have to confront a person more experienced than ourselves, it might be an approach to keep in mind.

Having set the parameters for his speech, Elihu's next step was to scold Job. But he started with a different approach than the other three counselors had taken. Elihu actually quoted what he had heard Job say earlier (33:8). Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar did not seem to pay much attention to Job's specific words. They had merely launched generalized arguments about the subject areas Job had touched upon.

But here was Elihu citing specifics. He recalled that Job had claimed to be "free from sin" (v. 9), and yet that God had still found fault with him, treating him as if he were the Lord's enemy (v. 10). Furthermore, Elihu quoted Job as having said that God had shackled his feet and was keeping a watch on all his thoughts and actions (v. 11).

To compare Elihu's memory of what Job said to what Job actually said, note the similarities and differences in the following sets of passages:

- Job 33:9 and 13:23
- Job 33:10 and 13:24
- Job 33:11 and 13:27

For the most part, we find that Elihu was accurate. But on the point of Job's being without sin, Elihu seems to have misinterpreted Job's words. While Job had claimed blamelessness and innocence, he had never claimed sinlessness. In fact, he openly admitted his sinfulness. For example, he had begged God, "Why do you not . . . forgive

my sins?" (7:21). What Job had actually claimed was that when his sins were measured alongside his acts of righteousness, he did not deserve the catastrophic situation he now found himself in.

Summarizing his opinion of Job's words, Elihu told Job, "You are not right, for God is greater than any mortal" (33:12). In other words, Elihu said Job had no business going to God with talk of his own innocence as if God were just another person eager to debate theological and philosophical aspects of living. According to Elihu, human beings, who are finite creatures, cannot even imagine comprehending the mysteries of God's actions in the universe. Therefore, all Job's pondering out loud was nothing more than a useless exercise. "God will do what He will," Elihu seems to have been telling Job, "and we have little or no say in the matter."

Job 33:13–37:24 in Brief

Elihu continued his speech expounding his view of God and human suffering. He pointed out to Job that though God is infinitely greater than we, He is our divine teacher and often allows suffering to instruct us and correct us when we are in error. He sometimes allows bad things to happen in order to bring us back into an obedient relationship with Himself (33:13–33).

Elihu was aware that Job had two main complaints—first, that God had wronged an innocent man; and second, that from Job's experience, receiving God's blessings or wrath was not dependent on whether one lived a righteous or a wicked life. Now addressing Job's three counselors, Elihu argued that God, in fact, was a God of justice and had no reason to treat anyone unjustly. Job's real problem, Elihu purported, was rebellion (Job 34).

In his next speech (Job 35), Elihu argued that people's behavior—whether wicked or righteous—affects only them, not God. Furthermore, he said that since God does not even necessarily answer the prayers of the oppressed, it was no wonder He did not respond to a rebel like Job.

Moving on to his final words (Job 36–37), Elihu affirmed God's merciful and mighty dealings with people: He exalts, disciplines, or destroys people as they deserve. Elihu again urged Job to turn from evil. Then Elihu launched into a long description of God's greatness as expressed in His control over nature. Neither Job nor anyone else could teach God anything.

God Responds to Job

Job 38–39

a God Questions Job about the Earth and Seas (38:1–11)

Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm. He said:

"Who is this that obscures my plans
with words without knowledge?
Brace yourself like a man;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me."
—Job 38:1–3

After waiting for so long in despair and anguish, Job finally received the one gift that must have meant the most to him: God spoke. God did not, however, give him an explanation for his suffering. Nor did He list Job's sins, as the counselors possibly would have wanted. God merely exposed Job to the wonders of His power and creation.

With great effectiveness, God's words demonstrated how limited is human knowledge, no matter how the counselors went on and on about their own wisdom. In the end, none of Job's questions were answered specifically. Nevertheless, after he had heard the words of the Lord, Job was drawn back to a complete faith in and worship of his Creator and Savior.

Ask Yourself . . . *How often do I go to the Lord in prayer expecting one answer but receiving another?*

God did not appear in a vision, but rather spoke to Job out of a storm—perhaps a whirlwind not unlike the one that had killed Job's children (v. 1; see 1:18–19). No indication is given that Job actually saw the Lord, only that he heard God's voice.

God was evidently angry, but His anger was holy and righteous, as opposed to what had been Elihu's anger. We can imagine how taken aback Job must have been. He probably didn't expect God to speak to him in such a direct manner.

The Lord initiated His speech by reminding Job of how he had questioned God's sense of justice. Though never cursing God, Job had reached a point during his ordeal when God seemed to be his enemy rather than his protector and provider. In the midst of his suffering, Job thought he had been raising honest,

perceptive questions. God set him straight immediately, asking him a rhetorical question that proved Job did not understand God's plan for ordering the universe (38:2). Job's speculations about the nature of God added up to little in the face of God's true identity.

Early in His speech to Job, the Lord implied that Job was now going to discover something of God's true nature. Therefore, the Lord told him to prepare himself for an inquisition. God said He would ask Job questions (v. 3).

By posing these questions to Job, God's intent was neither to condemn nor to humiliate His hurting servant, whom He Himself had at least twice called "blameless and upright" (1:8; 2:3). God was showing concern for His servant. Job had asked that his case be considered according to justice, and God was indeed granting him that request. The only difference was that Job wasn't going to be the one to ask the questions.

Job had posed questions of his own as he wondered aloud how God exercised His justice. Job had felt as though he had somehow been left out of God's scheme for ordering causes and events in the world in a just manner. Such questioning certainly could be taken as Job's criticism of the way God was handling His creation.

All of God's rhetorical questions focused on His awesome power, which contrasted with Job's limited strength and understanding. God's first questions dealt with the creation of the earth in terms of con-

In the Beginning . . .

The description of Creation and the natural world in f Job is harmonious with the Creation story in Genesis. Both portray God as the Author and Creator of the universe. Out of nothing, He created the light and darkness, the dry land and the sea, the birds and the animals.

The Creation story found in Genesis and affirmed in Job is vastly different than other creation accounts, such as an ancient story of creation found in a Babylonian epic. In this epic many gods appear along with monsters who have poison flowing through their veins instead of blood. The gods and monsters attack and kill each other. The formation of the universe, according to this idolatrous account, begins when the god Marduk kills the monster Tiamat.

> **"The flesh of the monster Marduk divided; he formed a cunning plan, He split her open like a flat fish into two halves— One half became the heavens, and the other half became the earth."**

structing a building (vv. 4–7).

Builders in Job's time often based their buildings on a foundation of stones. God demanded that Job tell Him where he was when God had laid the earth's foundation (v. 4).

For measuring, ancient builders would use a cord marked off in lengths. God wanted Job to tell Him who had measured the earth's dimensions (v. 5).

Builders preferred to build their foundations on a firm base, and they would often use a large stone in the corner to anchor the whole building. God asked Job about the earth's footings and cornerstone (v. 6).

Of course, it was God and God alone who had established the earth at Creation. Job didn't even exist yet. Some, however, had been present—the "morning stars" (v. 7, possibly referring to angels) and "the angels" (literally, "the sons of God"). These cheered God on as He created.

As we read these lines, we have cause to be thrilled with God's words. They put things in perspective for us. It can sometimes be tempting to think that we are in charge, that our good fortune, intelligence, money, or family lineage determines the outcome of events. Such foolish pride! Let us remind ourselves to take stock of who we really are in the face of our awesome God. He was the only one responsible for Creation. Where were we then?

Ask Yourself . . . *What can I do to remind myself that God created the universe and that He is still in charge?*

Verses 8–11 paint a beautiful picture of God's creation and limitation of the oceans. God asked Job who had enabled the waters to "burst forth from the womb" (v. 8). Some interpreters believe this imagery indicates that God was comparing His creation of the seas to the creation and birth of a creature. In other words, God served as a midwife as He brought the seas into existence on the earth.

Continuing the use of birth imagery, God noted that He had made the clouds as a garment for the sea. Then He wrapped the seas in darkness, as a baby would be wrapped in swaddling clothes (v. 9).

The Lord went on to explain how He set boundaries for the seas, that He decided where the sea would pound its waves on the shores. The imagery here is not that of birth but that of a strong city gate with its massive bar to prevent outsiders from getting in (vv. 10–11; compare Gen. 1:9).

Such power! There was no limit to it! By now Job—the complainer and skeptic—must have begun to understand at least somewhat about the immeasurable might and wisdom of God.

While we believers are privileged to come to God boldly in prayer because of Christ, we should never forget who God is. He is the King of kings!

Ask Yourself . . . *When I pray to God, do I sometimes forget just who it is that I am talking to? If so, what might I do to remember?*

b God Questions Job about Days and Places (38:12–21)

Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth?
Tell me, if you know all this.
—Job 38:18

God's questions to Job flowed unrelentingly. He turned now to asking Job about his knowledge of the dawn (vv. 12–15), geography (vv. 16–18), and light and darkness (vv. 19–21). God was pounding away at Job's sense of importance.

First, God wanted to know if Job caused the dawn to occur in the morning (v. 12). Of course, God Himself was in charge of the sunrise.

God described vividly how the light comes to earth at sunrise. He said the light grabs the earth by its edges just as a person might grasp a rug. Then the light shakes "the wicked out of it" just as a person might shake the dirt and dust from a rug (v. 13).

The message here is apparently that the light of the dawn catches wicked persons in the act of their evil deeds and forces them into the light (or truth) about their actions. Thus God promised Job that wrongdoers, though they may avoid justice for a time, will receive what they deserve in the end. Aside from the image of God's power, this picture should have brought some reassurance to Job—and to Job's counselors—that wicked people will someday face justice.

Not only do the deeds of the wicked stand out at the dawn of the morning, but the shape of the earth stands out as well. God said, "The earth takes shape like clay under a seal" (v. 14). He went on to say that the world's features—such as the mountains, valleys, and plains—"stand out like those of a garment." In both cases, the Lord was pointing out how the earth seems to take shape with the morning's first light.

Not yet finished with His commentary on evil deeds being exposed to the light, God stressed that "the wicked are denied their light" (v. 15). That is, wrongdoers are not granted light to see to commit their acts of sin, and yet (paradoxically) their evil deeds, done in the dark, eventually will be exposed to the light. God was affirming in some ways what Job had said earlier of the wicked: "For all of them, deep darkness is their morning; they make friends with the terrors of darkness" (24:17). But with the coming of light, the arms evildoers used to commit their violent acts are broken. In other words, God will eventually stop wrongdoers in their tracks.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I sometimes overwhelmed with the notion that the wicked are winning out over the righteous in this world? If so, how might I find reassurance from God?

God's next questions forced Job outside of his small circle of worry and took him to the farthest reaches of God's created world. First, God

The Red Sea at the Gulf of Suez. God asked Job if he had ever journeyed to the depths of the sea (Job 38:16).

asked Job about *journeying* (38:16). He asked Job if he had ever traveled to the ocean depths.

Second, He asked him about *seeing* (v. 17). The Lord questioned whether Job had ever seen the entrance to the abode of the dead.

Third, He asked him about *understanding* (v. 18). God wanted to hear if Job knew the great land masses of the earth.

What Job learned from God's questions was how ignorant he was in comparison to the Lord's vast wisdom, as well as how infinitely God controls and understands the world.

Ask Yourself . . . *How might a knowledge of God's infinite power and His wisdom have an impact on my daily life?*

God had already questioned Job about the light that ushered in each new day. Now He personified light and darkness, implying that someone must direct them to their appropriate places. So the Lord asked Job if he knew where light and darkness reside, and whether he could lead them to their proper positions at the proper time (vv. 19–20). Once more God showed Job some measure of the extent of His omnipotence by pointing out one of the ways He ordered the universe.

Verse 21 provides another example of God's probing irony. God tested Job by saying that he should surely know about the mystery of light and darkness, "for you were already born! You have lived so many years!"

In these words the Lord was teaching Job to accept God as God. No mere human could understand all the workings of the universe, much less control it. Therefore, God called upon Job to put aside all his idle speculation and to accept God's dominion over all things.

C God Asks Job about the Weather (38:22–30)

What is the way to the place where the lightning is dispersed, or the place where the east winds are scattered over the earth?
—Job 38:24

As the Lord pointed out various aspects of the universe, He had pushed Job to consider the outer limits of His creation. But at this point in the Lord's speech, He came back to something a bit more common. He asked Job about weather—first, snow and hail; then lightning, wind, and rain; then ice and frost.

With each mention of a weather feature, God made it clear that He was the one who controlled it. Neither Job nor any other human being could adjust or control the weather patterns. Indeed, even Job's knowledge of such patterns was lacking.

In poetic language God asked Job if he had ever entered "the storehouses of the snow" or seen "the storehouses of the hail" (v. 22). The Hebrew word translated "storehouses" is the same one translated "arsenal" in Jeremiah 50:25, which describes God's storing up of "the weapons of his wrath." The idea of an arsenal is carried through in this passage in Job, as God spoke of the snow and hail as weapons "for days of war and battle" (Job 38:23).

Other natural weapons in God's arsenal were lightning and wind, about which God next asked Job (v. 24). Still using imagery, God talked about these weather features as if He kept them in a specific place, retrieving them and dispensing them on the earth when He deemed it appropriate.

God's next question is fascinating. He asked Job to tell Him who causes rain and thunderstorms to fall in places on the earth where no one lives (vv. 25–26). Elihu had said that God uses nature to punish or bless mankind (see 37:13)—that is, the purpose of nature seemed interwoven with God's purpose for people. But in these verses, God's use of nature has nothing to do with human beings. The water He sends is intended solely to "satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass" (38:27). In other words, God waters the dry places and makes His creation beautiful simply because it pleases Him, and for no other reason.

Ask Yourself . . . *How do I respond when I realize God is doing spectacular things on land or under the sea that human beings know nothing about?*

On the subject of rain, God had yet another question. This may have been a question that many people in Job's day were asking as well as answering by creating, telling, and retelling mythological stories about nature. Basically, God asked Job if rain and dewdrops have a father, and if ice and frost have a mother (vv. 28–29). God then asked Job about a phenomenon unknown to the people of the ancient Near East. He asked Job about times when the

surface of the seas freezes (v. 30).

Thus verse 30 is not only lovely, but it is also amazing in its awareness. Either that, or it reflects a special knowledge that could have come only from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. No writer in the time and place of Job's story could have known anything about the freezing of the ocean's surface.

d God Questions Job about the Heavens (38:31–38)

Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs?
Do you know the laws of the heavens?
Can you set up God's dominion over the earth?

—Job 38:32–33

After asking Job about the many parts of the earth and their climatic variety, God pointed out the heavens so that Job might gain even more insight into God's creativity and dominion. Once again, God's purpose was to ask, "Job, if you think you're so wise, what say do you have over the sky and the constellations? In fact, what knowledge do you have about the divine law that keeps billions of celestial bodies running smoothly on their courses?"

Referring specifically to two star formations that are visible during certain seasons from the Northern Hemisphere, God asked Job if he was able to hold together the cluster of stars known as the Pleiades or loose the constellation known as Orion (v. 31). (Today the Pleiades are six stars forming a cluster in the constellation Taurus. Orion is a constellation represented on star charts by the figure of a hunter with a belt and sword.)

Continuing on the theme of the stars, God asked Job if he could manipulate the heavens so that the constellations appeared "in their seasons" (v. 32). In the process of His questioning, He mentioned two constellations: "the Bear with its cubs," known to us as Ursa Major or the Great Bear (the Big Dipper), and Ursa Minor, or the Little Bear (also called the Little Dipper). The various constellations rise in the sky at different seasons in the year.

We can easily understand how dumbstruck Job must have become at hearing God's words. For most of us, a short stroll out under a clear, starry night fills us with awe of the Lord's majesty. It's a good time to pause and praise Him, a good time to pray and give thanks that He is the One who keeps order in a vast creation.

God finally quizzed Job on what he knew about the laws behind the movements of these stars. And then returning to earth for an instant, He asked if Job could set up "God's dominion over the earth" (v. 33). The Lord's point in verses 31–33 was that Job was just as ignorant and powerless about the heavens as he

was about the earth.

Recorded in verses 34–38 is God's return to the subject of the weather. This time He asked Job about his power to bring about climatic changes. God can merely speak to the clouds and cause them to bring forth rain (see v. 34). He has the power to send lightning on its way as well (see v. 35). The best Job and all other people could do was to pray to the One who controls the weather, asking Him to send rain.

Ask Yourself . . . *How do I respond when I hear about weather-related disasters killing hundreds of people, while at the same time I realize that God is in control of the universe?*

It sometimes seems that while speaking to Job, God expressed His sense of humor. Note how He described the lightning bolts as reporting to Job with the words "Here we are" (v. 35).

God then inserted a couple of questions that may seem out of place, considering that He had just returned to the topic of weather. He asked Job who had given the heart wisdom and who had given the mind understanding (v. 36). So why are they here?

Part of the confusion comes from the fact that the actual meaning of the Hebrew words translated "heart" and "mind" may have changed. Some translators suggest that the words originally referred to two birds symbolizing wisdom—the ibis, supposedly able to predict the flooding of the Nile; and the rooster, able to forecast rain.

Continuing the train of thought, God asked who had enough wisdom to count the clouds (v. 37). Then He asked who can cause the rain to fall when the ground has become dry and needs watering (vv. 37–38). Rain is beautifully described as the tipping over of "the water jars of the heavens" (v. 37).

A large Palestinian water jar. God described rain as the tipping over of "the water jars of the heavens" (Job 38:37).

Job 38:39–39:30 in Brief

In this passage God offered varied glimpses of mostly wild animals and birds, and asked Job what control he had over them. Brought to Job's attention were lions, ravens, mountain goats, deer, wild donkeys, wild oxen, ostriches, war horses, hawks, and eagles. The intent of God's menagerie was to show Job that regardless of the ferociousness or peculiar nature of the creatures, all are under His control and care.

7 Job's Restoration

Job 40–42

a God's Challenge to Job (40:1–14)

Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?
Let him who accuses God answer him!

—Job 40:2

Through the series of questions He had posed to Job, God highlighted His omnipotence. In response to Job's questioning of the Lord's sense of justice, God had affirmed that He was still in control of the universe He had designed, created, and maintained. Having issued all these questions, God now focused His interrogation of Job on a single question: "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?" (v. 2).

This question is introduced by words that are not part of God's speech. Though Job had not yet answered any of the Lord's questions, chapter 40 begins with "The LORD said to Job" (v. 1). This is one of two times that the text refers to God's direct speech to Job (see also 38:1). The interruption has been explained in various ways. Some commentators assume God paused to see if Job had a reply to the questions He had already asked. Then upon hearing no answer from Job, the Lord added a final, more direct question. Others conjecture that Job made an earlier reply that has been lost.

Whatever the case, God wanted to know if Job, after hearing God express His command over the universe, was still eager to accuse God of negligence. So in addition to His question, the Lord made a direct statement to Job: "Let him who accuses God answer him!" (v. 2).

In response to God's questions and demand, Job laid aside his rage as well as his stance of stubbornly challenging the Lord. At several points during his suffering, Job had dared to question God's justice by suggesting that the Lord was not running the universe in the way Job thought it should be run. But now, obviously chastened by what God had told him, he replied humbly and with reverence (v. 3).

Job acknowledged before the Lord that he was of little worth—that he was insignificant when compared to God's overall scheme of Creation (v. 4). In light of all God had told

The Value of Questions

British author G. K. Chesterton offered insight into why God voiced a series of questions to Job rather than answering the questions posed by Job. He said the questions God raised to Job give us a more profound view of the Lord's power and wisdom. For by asking Job questions, God reshaped this man's rationalism into pure devotion to the Lord.

Jesus often approached the learners in His audiences by asking questions—oftentimes the questions were very challenging. For example, when the suspicious Pharisees watched to see if Jesus would heal a man on the Sabbath, Jesus asked them a couple of questions to encourage them to think more openly about the situation (Luke 14:3, 5; see also 20:3). The purpose of this technique was to throw questions at the doubters until they came to doubt their own doubts.

This was happening to Job as God issued him question after question. Commentator Elmer B. Smick wrote, "Job was simply overwhelmed with mysteries and paradoxes for which he had no answers; but in the midst of it all he came to understand what was too good to be told, that God knows what He is doing in His universe. Job had many questions to put to God, as do we all. Instead of God's trying to prove that it is an explainable world, however, He insisted that it is stranger than Job had ever imagined."

him, Job felt ashamed that he had ever raised his voice or that he had ever said such things as "I would present it to him as to a ruler" (31:37). To register his regret for saying too much, Job went on to promise that he would place his hand over his mouth in order to say no more (40:4). Indeed, he had nothing to add to what he had already said (v. 5). After hearing the voice of God, Job seems to have lost his desire to vindicate himself.

Ask Yourself . . . *During times of prayer, have I ever tried to keep quiet and simply receive God's Word and understand His will for me? If so, what happened during those times?*

In His first speech (38:2–39:30), God had exposed Job to His power over the natural universe. In the Lord's second major speech (40:7–41:34), He presented to Job His lordship over the moral universe. The opening of God's second speech is almost identical to the opening of His first speech (40:6–7; compare 38:1–3). Once again God spoke to Job from the midst of a storm, and once again He told him to prepare for a divine interrogation (40:7).

God's next series of questions related to His justice. God first asked Job if it was his intent to discredit God's justice (v. 8). Then, knowing Job's attitude toward his suffering, God asked if Job was content to condemn the Almighty to serve his own selfish purpose of justifying himself (v. 8). Though not going so far as to curse God, Job had certainly called into question God's integrity, especially for allowing him to suffer for no apparent reason.

God answered His own questions with more questions (vv. 9–14). Each question portrays attributes of God. In posing these questions to Job, it is possible that God was actually teasing him—asking him if he wanted to dress up like God and demolish the wicked people of the world.

In an almost mocking tone, God sought to adjust Job's attitude by asking him if he thought he had "an arm like God's" and a voice of "thunder" (v. 9). Job seemed to have assumed the role of being God's critic, which was almost like making himself equal or superior to the Lord. Therefore, God asked Job if he really thought he was up for such a task. Because if he was, Job should also have been prepared to array himself with glory, splendor, honor, and majesty like that possessed by the Lord (v. 10).

In addition, God said, if Job's might matched the might of the Lord, he should indulge himself in godly anger, unleashing his terrible wrath by crushing prideful and wicked people (vv. 11–12). Indeed, God told him to "bury them all in the dust together; shroud their faces in the grave" (v. 13).

Assuming Job could perform all these mighty acts, God concluded He would willingly admit to Job that this mere man possessed the power needed to save himself (v. 14). In other words, if Job were as mighty and righteous as he seemed to be claiming that he was, then he didn't really need God.

This was God's rather indirect way of convincing Job that He was, in fact, a moral God and that justice would be done. It is not hard to imagine Job cowering in the face of God's rebuke, embarrassed and ashamed after God's purposeful mocking. Job knew all too well how short he would fall compared to the omnipotence and holiness of God.

Surely, we would have felt the same way were our circumstances the same. But how easily we forget our place. How easily we blow ourselves up into magnificent size, strutting around showing off our goodness, talent, or wealth. Maybe we even become proud of how humble and holy we are compared

to other people. If that happens, we need to stop and, like Job, listen to what God has to say to us. It would be enough of a rebuke if the only message we hear is "I am God. Who are you?"

Job 40:15–41:34 in Brief

Throughout the rest of God's second major speech, the Lord told Job about His control over behemoth and leviathan, two creatures known for their size, strength, and toughness. The nature of these creatures has been interpreted in different ways.

Some have proposed that God was referring to commonly known mythical creatures (as imagined by other nations) that would represent rebellion against God's moral order. Though lore would have these monsters attempting to defy God's power, God is always in complete control and supreme.

Interpreted literally, the two creatures are seen as giant beasts. The behemoth (40:15–24) is a land animal—perhaps a hippopotamus, elephant, or as some suggest, a great dinosaur—with tremendous muscles in its belly. The leviathan (Job 41) is a sea creature—perhaps a crocodile, whale, or again as some propose, a type of sea monster on the order of a dinosaur. If God could create and maintain such awesome beasts, how much greater God must be.

In either case, the Lord's message is meant to encourage Job to rely upon and rest in God's omnipotence.

b Job Repents before the Lord (42:1–6)

My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes.
—Job 42:5–6

God had finished speaking, and now it was time for Job to respond again. He still knew nothing about Satan's challenge at the beginning of the drama. He had no idea God was allowing him to be tested so as to show Satan that Job was "blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (1:8). Job didn't even know that he had basically passed the test—even though he, like his counselors, had talked too much and had made a fool of himself before God.

For the most part, Job was still in the dark—except now he knew unmistakably that the Lord created and sustains the universe, and that He manages the moral order. Furthermore, Job must have realized now that God would keep him close to His heart.

So what was Job to say?

He replied simply, without trying to indulge in fancy rhetoric, that he understood the message of God's speeches. He knew God is all-powerful and that nothing can hinder His plans (42:1–2). In God's strong hands all things—even justice for the suffering—will be worked out eventually.

Job went on to apologize for

his earlier attitude and behavior. He referred specifically to two statements God had made. First, Job quoted God's reprimand at the beginning of His first speech. God had asked, "Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?" (v. 3; compare 38:2). Now Job admitted his ignorance. His answer was simple and contrite: "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (42:3).

Second, Job referred to a statement God had made at the beginning of both major speeches. God had ordered Job to listen because He was going to ask questions (v. 4; compare 38:3; 40:7).

Before God's interrogation of him, Job said, he had only known *of* God. He had known the Lord through what he had learned from tradition and from what others had told him. Perhaps Job was referring to the words about God he had heard from his counselors. But all such words conveyed only indirect knowledge about the Lord.

Through God's interrogation, Job experienced the Lord and His nature firsthand. Job learned of God's power and righteousness by being allowed to enter the Lord's presence and listen to His voice. And though he didn't actually see God, he felt as though he had met Him face-to-face (42:5).

Probably the only reaction Job could have had to this experience was to loathe himself—to see his own knowledge, self-assessment, and arguments for the nonsense they were (v. 6). His words "I despise myself" could also be translated "I reject what I said." Thus Job may have intended to take back all the spiritually rebellious statements he had made in his speeches to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.

Job also repented "in dust and ashes," noting his humiliation and insignificance. But his repentance should not be taken to be regret for the host of sins his counselors had accused him of. Job was correct in his opinion that his miserable condition was not a result of his sin. In addition, he had learned from God Himself that life and suffering are far more complex and mysterious than he or his friends had ever imagined.

Job's repentance, therefore, was for boldly questioning God's wisdom and ability to manage human affairs. He wanted the Lord to know that he had experienced a dramatic change in his attitude. The Hebrew word translated "repent" in verse 6 means more than to confess one's sins. It also means to "console oneself" or to "be comforted." Job said he was discarding all his previous, false notions of God, and was placing his assurance in the truth that God was not his enemy but his friend and redeemer.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I need to have a change of heart and repent over a time when I boldly questioned God's plan for my life or for someone else's? If so, will I change and repent?*

God Restores Job (42:7–17)

After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before.

—Job 42:10

In Job's conclusion (vv. 7–17), which was written in narrative form like the introduction (Job 1–2), God scolded Job's friends and ordered them to make a sacrifice to atone for their errant counsel. The conclusion also includes the story of how God restored Job's prosperity—in fact, giving him more than he had previously possessed.

Before Job's restoration took place, God voiced His anger with Job's three comforters—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. (Curiously missing from the group is Elihu.)

Sometime after teaching Job about His dominion over the universe, God spoke to Eliphaz, who may have been the eldest among the friends of Job. God not only announced His anger with the three men, but He also stated the cause of His anger. He told Eliphaz, "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has" (42:7).

How surprised these three counselors must have been! They likely assumed that they had been speaking on God's behalf. Now they learned that they were facing the brunt of God's anger because of their mistaken words.

God told Eliphaz that Job had escaped condemnation because he had spoken what was right. But how could God say this when He had just accused Job of obscuring His counsel (see v. 3)? After all, Job had ranted and raved. He had questioned God's justice. He had spoken in ignorance.

The Hebrew word translated "truth" may also mean "right" or "established," among numerous other possible meanings. So perhaps God was commending Job for taking the risk of being honest in voicing his feelings openly to the Lord. Perhaps God was praising Job for his sincerity. Or perhaps God was simply saying Job was right about his alleged sins not causing his suffering.

In retrospect, it seems that both Job and his counselors were half right and half wrong. Job was right about the fact that he was not suffering as a punishment for his sins, but he did wrong in questioning God's justice. Job's counselors were right about God's control over the universe, but they were wrong to assume Job's suffering was linked to some hidden sin. Certainly both Job and his friends had a limited view of God and His plan for the world.

Ask Yourself . . . *Is my view of God too limited? If so, what might I do to expand it?*

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar must have been stunned when they learned that it was they, and not Job, whom God required to offer a sacri-

fice for sins. The Lord told them to go to Job, taking with them seven bulls and seven rams. In Job's presence—so that Job could look on—they were to sacrifice these animals. This was a large sacrifice, perhaps indicating how seriously God took their error. As part of the ceremony, Job would pray for them so that God would not deal harshly with them. At this point God repeated His judgment: "You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has" (v. 8).

A Canaanite altar unearthed at Tel Hazor, Israel. Job's friends may have used an altar something like this to make atonement for their sins.

The three disgraced friends obeyed what the Lord had commanded them. Job prayed for their forgiveness, and God answered Job's prayer (v. 9).

Presumably it was soon after this ritual was completed that God restored Job's prosperity. Indeed, the Lord doubled Job's previous wealth. But He did so, not coincidentally, only after Job prayed for his friends (v. 10).

In his newfound wisdom and humility, Job obeyed the Lord, and the Lord granted Job both inner and outer healing.

Ask Yourself . . . *How might God prepare my heart to forgive those who have angered or betrayed me?*

The final verses of Job show in dramatic fashion just how magnificent was his restoration. Not only was his prosperity doubled, but his relatives, who had remained distant during his ordeal, returned to his side to comfort him. And as they returned, each bore expensive gifts for Job—"a piece of silver and a gold ring"—and joined him in a meal of celebration (v. 11).

Verse 12 states that "the LORD blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the former part." Some of those blessings are then listed, beginning with Job's flocks, which included 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 2,000 oxen, and 1,000 donkeys. In all, Job's livestock were replenished so that he owned at least 23,000 animals!

Having lost his children as part of his tragic ordeal, perhaps one of Job's greatest blessings was that he fathered seven new sons and three new daughters (v. 13). Though the names of the seven sons were not recorded, the daughters were named *Jemimah*, meaning "turtledove"; *Keziah*, for a spice plant resembling cinnamon; and *Keren-Happuch*, for the highly prized eye shadow antimony (v. 14).

"Nowhere in all the land," the report says, "were there found women as beautiful as Job's daughters" (v. 15). The emphasis on their beauty was characteristic of the cultural tradition of Job's day. But the fact that Job gave the daughters an inheritance along with their brothers was very unusual in that time and culture. Perhaps it signified the special love Job had for all of his children, especially after losing his first family.

Job closes with a brief summary of the rest of Job's life. The warm and tender relationships that Job certainly missed during his time of suffering apparently were a mainstay for the remainder of his years. Job died at the age of 140, after seeing "his children and their children to the fourth generation" (v. 16). The phrase telling that he died "an old man and full of years" (v. 17) expresses that Job died in a dignified and peaceful manner, having come to the end of a fulfilling life.

God blessed Job with 6,000 camels, among more than 20,000 other animals, after his time of suffering.

The message of Job is that God is sovereign, regardless of what happens to the wicked or the righteous. Job had endured his test. He had shown his uprightness and unselfishness. In the end, God chose to bless His servant. He did so not necessarily to teach Job or anyone else a lesson, but simply because it was His pleasure.

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I prepared to accept both the good times and the bad times that God may allow into my life?*

As far as Satan's original challenge to God is concerned (see 1:9-11; 2:4–5), Job not only withstood Satan's onslaught, but he also won the contest Satan had proposed. Job proved that a person can love God simply because He is God, and not because that person expects a reward for all his or her efforts.

In his commentary on Job, Francis I. Andersen wrote, "Job is vindicated by a faith in God's goodness that had survived a terrible deprivation and, indeed, had grown in scope, unsupported by Israel's historical creed of the mighty acts of God, unsupported by life in the covenant community, . . . unsupported by revealed knowledge from prophets, unsupported by tradition and contradicted by experience."

Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes presents the reflections of a man who boldly faced the complex questions of life, only to conclude in the end that true meaning and joy come only from God.

"Meaningless! Meaningless! . . . Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless" was the author's cry of despair (Eccl. 1:2). Indeed, he carried this sentiment throughout the book. The answer to this cry of despair does not become clear until the book's conclusion, in which the writer declared that to discover meaning and wisdom, people must "fear God and keep his commandments" (12:13).

Everything in Ecclesiastes must be seen within the framework of these opening and closing statements. The book is a profound, God-breathed treatise that should encourage believers to work diligently toward a God-centered view of life.

Purpose

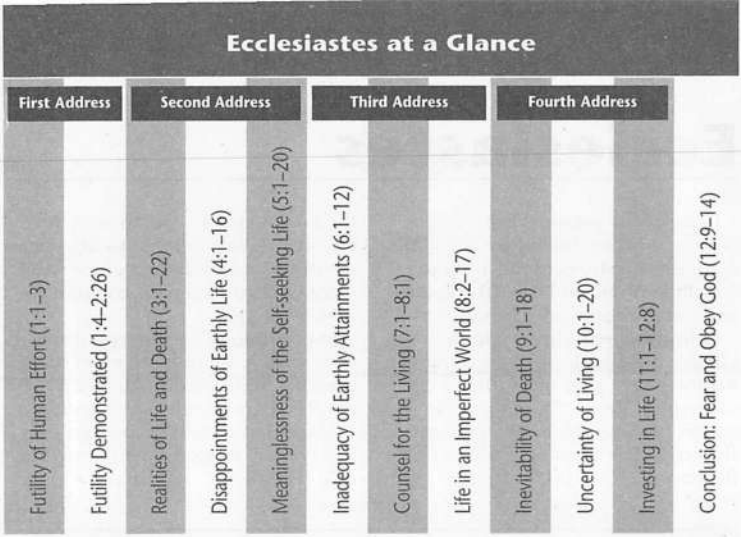
The author of Ecclesiastes examined the things that human beings live for, including wisdom, pleasure, work, progress, and wealth. And yet no matter what they attempt to attain in life, they all meet the same destiny—they die and are forgotten by others.

In that way, the author did not try to hide the futility that people face. Indeed, he emphasized that futility. He taught that all the goals of human beings have limitations—even wisdom. Thus it is useless for them to seek to master their own destiny.

There is, however, an underlying hope in the book. Even though all human striving will eventually fail, God's purposes will never fail. Through the experience of one who seemed to have tried everything, the author concluded—based upon his faith in the Lord—that God had ordered life according to His own purposes. Therefore, the best thing a person can do is to accept and enjoy life as God has given it.

Author and Date

King Solomon, who reigned over Israel for 40 years (about 970–930 B.C.), traditionally has been identified as the author of Ecclesiastes. The strongest evidence for this is that the author—who called himself "Teacher," translated from the Hebrew word qoheleth—initially



referred to himself as "son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1). After a poetic interlude, he made the same reference again—"I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem" (vs. 12), apparently identifying himself as Solomon.

Commentator Donald R. Glenn notes this view was generally accepted until the Age of Enlightenment (17th century), when the application of literary and historical criticism led to widespread skepticism of Solomon's authorship. Critics argued that any king of Judah would have traditionally been identified by Davidic sonship. Most notably, the skeptics believed there is evidence that the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes comes from a later time period than the tenth century B.C. However, some studies have shown that features explained as characteristic of Aramaic or late Hebrew can also be shown in Canaanite-Phoenician literature, which was written well before Solomon's time.

Likewise, while some scholars suggest multiple authors wrote Ecclesiastes, too many factors—such as the book's unity of style, theme, and purpose—indicate that Ecclesiastes had a single author who wrestled with various approaches to life. And the fact that the author was a king, and that he was evidently quite wise, bolsters the view that Solomon was the sole author.

Faithful students of Scripture can fully accept the book of Ecclesiastes as part of the inspired Word of God.

8 The Teacher Looks at Life

Ecclesiastes 1–2

a Seeing Nothing New (1:1–11)

Is there anything of which one can say,
"Look! This is something new"?
It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.
—Ecclesiastes 1:10

Ecclesiastes is a Greek word that is translated "Preacher" or "Teacher" or, more specifically, "one who gathers an assembly to address it." Thus the words of the Teacher, recorded in Ecclesiastes, were to be delivered publicly, perhaps in an outer court of the temple or a palace.

The first line of this book does not make clear who wrote it. Some have suggested a secretary wrote down the words of the Teacher as he spoke them to an assembly, or perhaps a later compiler collected these sayings of the Teacher. However, it is most reasonable that the author referred to himself as "the Teacher" (v. 1), and then proceeded to write a biblical treatise on the futility of life without God.

The Teacher apparently intended for his words to be read, not just by those people who were devoted to the Lord, but by a more general, secular audience as well. This would explain why Ecclesiastes is sometimes seen as more worldly than the other books in the Bible. It was meant to step outside of the place of worship and meet common people as they live out their lives.

In this sense, Ecclesiastes has a special place in Scripture. Especially today, when modern life has become so humanistic and secular, we need a book that addresses head-on the issues of what happens to people who throw out all religious values. In many respects, this book is addressed to people who live selfishly for the moment, as if all that mattered in life were attaining things and fitting in to the cultural values of the world. Most of us know people like that. Indeed, they are all around us!

At the beginning of Ecclesiastes, the author identified the Teacher as the "son of David, king in Jerusalem" (v. 1). Because the immediate son of David who became the king of Israel was Solomon, it is reasonable for us to understand that the Teacher of wisdom whose words

have been recorded in Ecclesiastes was King Solomon.

Ecclesiastes begins by presenting the problem that will be addressed throughout: that of life and of living. Solomon would go on to show how a life without God at its center is chaotic, meaningless, and discontented. In a phrase, life without God is an exercise in futility.

Thus the Teacher commended his hearers to a God-centered life by critiquing—sometimes one at a time—various lifestyles and life pursuits in which God was not the basis. Indeed, Michael A. Eaton, in his commentary on Ecclesiastes, writes that the purpose of this book is to defend "the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative."

The Teacher came right to the point. "Meaningless! Meaningless!" (v. 2), he cried out. It is important to note that these words did not necessarily express Solomon's own view of life. Rather, this outcry was how he summed up the lives of those people who decided to eliminate God from their outlook and lifestyle. For the godless, life was truly meaningless.

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes declared life futile for those who reject God because they have no hope beyond this earthly existence. All they have is what they work for now, and soon all that will pass away.

Ironically, such people typically see life in terms of profit and loss. They strive for earthly profit, often inconsiderate of whom they have to hurt or push aside to get it. But in the end, their decisions—because they have not taken into consideration obedience to God—lead them to total loss. Solomon described this way of life in the form of a rhetorical question: "What do people

Solomon the King

Solomon became king of Israel around 970 B.C. and reigned in Jerusalem until his death some 40 years later. The younger son of David and Bathsheba, Solomon's name means "peaceable." David may have given him this name as a hope and sign that the coming years in Israel would be peaceful, especially in contrast to the stormy years of war and strife that often marked David's reign over the people.

News of Solomon's political might, his wisdom, and the splendor of his court eventually spread throughout the known world. A number of details included in Ecclesiastes confirm what we know from other Scripture passages about Solomon. For instance, he possessed great wisdom (Eccl. 1:16). During his reign, he accumulated great wealth and was able to pursue practically all forms of pleasure (2:1–9). In addition, he was known for his creativity and his building projects (vv. 4–6), and he valued the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge (12:9–12).

gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?" (v. 3). The answer, of course, was nothing.

Ask Yourself . . . What am I really striving for in my life? Will what I am striving for have any eternal meaning?

The Teacher then depicted the cycle of humanity's meaningless toil in terms of human history and nature, touching on the basic elements of the created order. First, he said people come and go, but "the earth remains forever" (v. 4). This contrast pointed out the relative shortness of a person's life on earth, especially when compared to the apparent permanence of the earth. But just as the cycle of human life continues unabated on its meaningless course, so does the earth.

Second, he addressed the cycle of the sun. In addition to the ebb and flow of history on the earth, the rising and setting of the sun also followed an endless cycle (v. 5). Here Solomon may have implied that the sun actually grew weary of the process of rising and setting every day, perhaps introducing how the day-to-day aspects of life soon grow tiresome. And yet the seemingly endless cycle of the sun also reminded his hearers of the briefness of their own lives.

Third, Solomon pointed out how the wind travels north and south, continuously blowing around, "ever returning on its course" (v. 6). Like the individual lives of human beings, the wind seems to flow everywhere, and yet it never veers off its determined course. The implication for humanity is that we live, and then we die. We have no power to break this cycle.

Fourth, he described water's cycle of falling to the earth, creating streams, and flowing to the sea, which "is never full" (v. 7). This cycle repeats itself infinitely. Indeed, the streams flow into the seas and then the water returns to the streams. Like the earth, the sun, and the wind, the water cycle continues unbroken.

Again, it should be noted that the Teacher was not talking about nature from the perspective of a believer. The believer should typically recognize all of nature as testimony to the Creator. But Solomon here was viewing nature through the eyes of those who think there is no God. For such people, there is no loving Creator behind nature, and hence life becomes one long monotonous repetition.

With such a view, "all things are wearisome, more than one can say" (v. 8). The human mind keeps searching for meaning, but it will never find it in nature alone (v. 8). As long as a person determinedly denies God, he or she cannot break through the cycle of time and repetition to discover that which is permanent and absolute—God Himself.

As long as people hold to that mindset, the only conclusion they can draw is that everything that has happened will happen again. In essence, "there is nothing new under the sun" (v. 9). And if that, indeed, were the case, then nothing we do matters because it has all been done

before and has no more meaning now than it did when it was done before.

The Teacher restated this thought in the remaining two verses of this section, though this time he looked ahead to the future. He asked if anyone can say, "Look! This is something new" (v. 10). The answer, again, is no because "it was here before our time."

Adding insult to injury, Solomon showed that as generations of people come and go, they are no longer remembered. He said the men and women of old have already been forgotten, and the people who will live in the future "will not be remembered by those who follow" them (v. 11).

Who would choose such a life? Sad to say, most people do. Many, including some who call themselves Christians, become so preoccupied with themselves or with the pursuit of wealth or pleasure or fame that they fail to stop and ask what their life is all about. It is common to hear stories of people who appear successful but own up to feeling miserable, despite having everything they thought they wanted.

Though some people deceive themselves into living as if their earthly existence will never end, we must all someday die (see Heb. 9:27). Therefore, it is best that we maintain an eternal, heavenly perspective rather than a limited, earthly one. With the Teacher, we must face the fact that the earthly life given to us by God sooner or later pops like a bubble and disappears. Thus how we spend our brief life on earth matters immensely.

The Pursuit of Wisdom (1:12–18)

I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

—Ecclesiastes 1:13-14

After his opening statement about the meaninglessness of life without God, the Teacher told of his own personal experiences. He explained how he had tried to find meaning in various ways—through wisdom, pleasure, work, success, and wealth, for example. He found, however, that none of these in themselves brought meaning to his life.

As the king of Israel, he devoted himself to search out "by wisdom all that is done under heaven" (vv. 12–13). As a result of his study, he discovered two things.

First, he learned that God had placed a "heavy burden" on the human race (v. 13). What was this heavy burden? Some have suggested that he was referring to the higher intelligence or awareness God gave human beings—intelligence that distinguishes us from animals. Because we were created

in the image of God, people realize that there must be more to life than simple physical survival and existence. We can sense that there must be meaning for our lives, that there must be an ideal to strive for. And this is our heavy burden.

God has given us the heavy burden of our conscience, and this is what keeps us striving to find meaning, to discover ways we might glorify God.

The second thing Solomon discovered was that all the toil and activity that people devoted themselves to were "meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (v. 14). All earthbound goals, no matter what effort we expend to attain them, end up being like the wind—something we can chase but never catch.

It is interesting that the Teacher used the phrase "under the sun" in verse 14, whereas he used the phrase "under heaven" in verse 13. "Under the sun" is used 29 times in Ecclesiastes, and nowhere else in Scripture. "Under heaven" occurs

Solomon's Love of Wisdom

When the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream to grant him whatever he asked for, Solomon replied, "I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong" (1 Kings 3:7–9).

God granted Solomon the wisdom he had requested, and certainly Solomon grew to love, practice, and expand upon the wisdom he had been given. Solomon compiled wise maxims of other thinkers. In addition, he wrote new proverbs based on his own insights and experience from daily life.

In fact, he went so far as to personify wisdom in his writings, speaking of it as if it were a living, breathing person. For example, he once wrote, "Out in the open wisdom calls aloud, she raises her voice in the public square; on top of the wall she cries out, at the city gate she makes her speech" (Prov. 1:20–21).

threetimes in Ecclesiastes, and 12 times throughout the rest of the Bible.

Two meanings have been proposed for experiences done "under the sun" and "under heaven." One is "life without reference or allegiance to God or His revelation." Another is "life here on this earth."

The Teacher went on to summarize, as in a proverb, what happened when he set out to conquer knowledge and wisdom on his own. He was unable to explain the profundities of life in neat categories; that is, he couldn't "straighten" what life had become"crooked" (v. 15). And just when he thought he had considered everything important, something else came along to make him realize people lack ultimate meaning.

So what was the Teacher's conclusion about pursuing wisdom? He noted that even though he had "increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem" (v. 16), and though he had diligently applied himself "to the understanding of wisdom" and of folly, such pursuits were like "chasing after the wind" (v. 17).

Solomon realized that no one can break through to meaning and truth by reason alone. Even to attempt to do so brings "much sorrow" (v. 18). Efforts to place knowledge as the supreme end of life—without the love of a caring God—simply brings on more heartache.

Ask Yourself . . . *In what ways might I place too much confidence in human knowledge and wisdom?*

C Meaninglessness in Pleasure and Work (2:1–11)

Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun.

—Ecclesiastes 2:11

If anyone could have tested the theory that wealth could buy lasting pleasure and happiness, Solomon could. As king of Israel, Solomon was probably one of the richest people on earth. He could have almost anything he desired for his own pleasure. So he indulged himself.

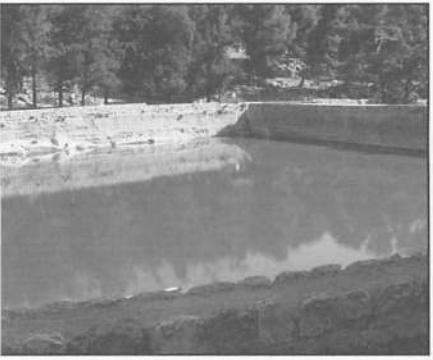
What was the result? The same as it was when he pursued wisdom. It proved to be meaningless.

The Teacher admitted to testing pleasure "to find out what is good" (v. 1). He discovered it to be futile. Furthermore, he tested laughter. What lasting benefits did his good times accomplish? Nothing. At the end of such indulgence, Solomon was left empty, asking himself, *What good is it?* (v. 2).

The Teacher probably did not give way to excessive hedonism or immoral pleasure for its own sake. Rather, he was taking an honest look at sensual pleasures that were likely acceptable to an upright citizen or king of his day.

Having failed at other attempts, Solomon tried to cheer himself by

drinking wine. At the same time, he tried the silly and hilarious pursuits of folly. Again, there's no indication that he overindulged himself in these activities, becoming drunk or out of control, for instance. Rather, he seems to be conducting a test. He said his mind still guided him with wisdom (v. 3). He kept his head about him enough to know that his real motive in acting out such behavior was to do research about life—"to see what was good for people to do under heaven during the few days of their lives" (v. 3).



One of three pools near Jerusalem supposed to have been built by Solomon as part of his lavish public works projects. Together the pools can hold more than 40 million gallons of water.

As if to prove how sensible he was, Solomon went on to say that he sought to find happiness by spending his fabulous wealth on great projects, most of which involved a lot of work. He built houses and vineyards (v. 4). He created gardens and parks filled with fruit trees (v. 5). He constructed reservoirs for the trees (v. 6). In all of these grand projects he resembled other monarchs in ancient times, especially in Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia.

To help him build these projects, and to serve him so that he could enhance his own level of comfort, the Teacher purchased slaves (v. 7). To expand his wealth, he accumulated "more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before" him (v. 7). Therefore, he not only maintained but also increased his pursuit of the luxurious life, testing to see if material abundance would bring him real happiness.

For that same purpose, he also amassed great stockpiles of silver and gold (v. 8). He surrounded himself with beautiful music, acquiring the best singers in the land to perform for him (v. 8). Apparently also present, he admitted, were wives and concubines who satisfied his sexual desires, although the meaning of the Hebrew word translated "harem" is not clear. Such a translation is viable, of course, when it is considered that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines (see 1 Kings 11:3). In short, the Teacher said he tried all "the delights of a man's heart" (Eccl. 2:8).

In the process, Solomon became "greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem" (v. 9). And yet, as he tested

the contentment and happiness brought on by such activities, his wisdom remained with him (v. 9).

Basically, the Teacher's test for meaning in these experiences was to indulge in whatever he wanted—to see how he would feel about it. He confessed that he did not deny himself anything. He refused no pleasure. In the end, he admitted that he took delight in his work, which "was the reward for all my toil" (v. 10).

Even so, when he looked back over what he had done, all that he could conclude was that "everything was meaningless" (v. 11). Pleasure, wealth, work—all of these failed his test for meaning. None of them brought the contentment that all human beings crave. For all his efforts, nothing was gained.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I sometimes felt that if I only had more wealth or pleasure in my life, I would be a more contented person?*

Ecclesiastes 2:12–26 in Brief

Noting the certainty of death, Solomon considered whether wisdom and labor bring more meaning to life than do foolishness and laziness. It is clear, he admitted, that wisdom is better than foolishness. But all people are destined to the same fate—the grave. Thus wisdom and foolishness and labor and laziness receive the same reward.

Furthermore, work is futile because workers cannot always enjoy the fruit of their labors but must leave it to others when they die. Yet the Teacher advised getting whatever satisfaction from work one can. The righteous are blessed, while sinners lose what they accumulate.

9 The Teacher Reflects on Life and God

Ecclesiastes 3–5

a Exploring God's Timing (3:1–8)

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity
under the heavens:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to
uproot.

—Ecclesiastes 3:1–2

Solomon had already lamented how life was meaningless when viewed apart from God. He had described how life occurred in a vicious cycle, repeating itself again and again. Now he was ready to take another look at living and dying, this time seeing some semblance of order and meaning because of God's dominion.

Solomon discovered that there is "a season for every activity under heaven" (v. 1). God has ordained a time for practically everything. Our responsibility is to seek the Lord's wisdom so that we may discern what activities go with what seasons.

Verses 2–8 list many of the activities that there are under heaven. We find here 14 pairs of opposites. In Hebrew speech, mentioning opposites together expressed totality (for example, "heaven and earth" stands for all of physical and spiritual reality). Thus these 14 pairs stand for all the activities of life.

A time to be born and a time to die (v. 2a). The Teacher opened his list of the activities of life with the most momentous events of all—birth and death. In Solomon's view, God has a plan for our arrival in time, for the living out of our lives, and for our departure from life. The Teacher had already portrayed how brief a person's life span is. Here he summed up life in its beginning and end. The rest of this poem addresses what comes between birth and death.

A time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build (vv. 2b–3). These three lines of the poem address creative and destructive activities used for either establishing or undermining. Planting seeds and pulling weeds must be done to reap a harvest. The same is true of life. Some elements must be planted and others uprooted if one's life is to be complete and meaningful.

Israel Planted and Uprooted

Bible commentator Matthew Henry suggested that Ecclesiastes 3:2 refers to God's dealings with the nation of Israel. First came the time when God planted the nation of Israel in Canaan. But in order to do that, He had to uproot those nations that already dwelt there. Otherwise, there would be no room for His chosen people.

Eventually, there came a time when the Israelites, too, had to be uprooted. Because of their sinfulness and their disregard for their covenant with God, the people of Israel were taken captive by neighboring peoples.

The prophet Jeremiah used the same imagery when he cited God's two-pronged decree: "If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it" (Jer. 18:7–10).

By saying there is a time to kill, Solomon was not condoning premeditated murder. His point was something more complex than that. Perhaps he was suggesting that we must wrestle for God's wisdom during times when we, too, are confronted with aggression. For instance, when is the right time to resist evil with forcefulness? On the other hand, when is it time to seek reconciliation and healing?

Of course, there are also times when those who seek to fear and obey God need to tear down negative aspects of their personal lives and times when they need to build up the positive aspects. In that sense, the meaning of "a time to tear down and a time to build" is much like that of "a time to plant and a time to uproot."

Ask Yourself . . . *Is there a negative aspect of my life that I need to tear down? Is there a positive aspect that I need to build up?*

A time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance (v. 4). The Teacher covered the range of human emotions—both private and public—in these two lines of the poem. The Hebrew words translated "weep" and "laugh" indicate expressions of an individual's emotions, while the Hebrew words translated "mourn" and "dance" indicate expressions of a group's emotions. In other words, there is a time for an individual to be sad, and a time for that person to be happy. There is also a time for an individual to join with others in lamenting

a loss, and a time for that person to join with others in a good time.

A time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain (v. 5). Various interpretations exist of these two lines of the poem, which focus on friendship and enmity. In ancient times, fields taken by enemies were made unproductive by scattering stones across them. On the other hand, stones were gathered from fields as a sign of a people's desire for peace. An opposite interpretation points to the gathering of stones for use in building a wall to keep out invaders. Tearing down those stone walls indicated a people's desire to make peace with their enemies.

According to one interpretation, "a time to embrace" is a call for us to hold someone who is experiencing pain, grief, or reconciliation. And yet at other times, it is best for us to respect a person's privacy, and not to interfere. A second, more literal interpretation places the Teacher's advice in the context of love and its physical expression between a husband and wife. Thus there is a time to show affection and a time to refrain from showing affection.

A time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend (vv. 6–7a). At least a portion of our lives consists of our concern for accumulating or getting rid of possessions. According to the Teacher, God gives us special times when we must search out for things, friendships, and goals, and hold on to them when we acquire them. But there are other times when He calls us to give these up.

***Ask Yourself** . . . What might God have me seek out or give up?*

The tearing and mending most likely refer to the ancient custom of tearing one's clothes in grief. If so, this line restates verse 4, in that it shows there is a time to express grief and a time to recover from grief.

A time to be silent and a time to speak (v. 7b). Communication, a key part of our lives as human beings, is like a two-way street. Thus Solomon said there is a time to remain quiet and a time to voice our opinion, a time to listen and a time to remark.

A time to love and a time to hate (v. 8a). Human life can hardly resemble what it is supposed to be without affections. The Teacher realized our lives will be marked with both love and hatred, and he encouraged his hearers to be careful about the times both are exercised. Centuries later, the apostle Paul stressed that Christians should love what is good and hate what is evil (see Rom. 12:9).

***Ask Yourself** . . . Do I sometimes love that which I should hate and hate that which I should love?*

A time for war and a time for peace (v. 8b). As a king, Solomon did not leave out the political endeavors of his hearers. The same emotions that can give rise to love or hatred in two individuals can give rise to war or peace in two communities. Conflicts will always arise. Sometimes wrong is resisted with force; at other times, peace is the goal.

b Humanity's Burden and God's Gift (3:9–15)

That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.
—Ecclesiastes 3:13

Following the poem about God's timing and the seasons of life, Solomon asked, "What do workers gain from their toil?" (v. 9). A modern paraphrase of this question might look like this: "My job seems boring and never-ending. What do I get out of it?"

The Teacher answered his own question by pondering further the nature of the human burden. The first part of the "burden God has laid on the human race" (v. 10) is that people are to attempt to determine on a daily basis where we fit into His plan. If we follow the great rhythm of God's timing—described beautifully in the first eight verses—then we will find meaning in the labors of our life. We will discover, as a matter of fact, that His perfect plan is to make "everything beautiful in its time" (v. 11).

The second part of the burden God has put upon humanity is that He has "set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (v. 11). We spend at least some time contemplating how our lives fit into God's eternal perspective, and this sets us apart from the animals. We do not live only by our instincts. We are different from ferrets and foxes because we attempt to understand—through philosophy, theology, science, and ideology—the full scope of life. This search only frustrates us, however, because in our finite minds and hearts, we constantly discover anew that the whole picture of life on planet Earth eludes us.

TOOLS of the TRADES

Tools of trades common in ancient Israel. King Solomon said that work doesn't gain the worker anything, and yet he also said that finding satisfaction in one's toil is a gift from God.

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Ask Yourself . . . *How can I maintain my recognition that only God has all the answers to the complex questions of life despite much that strikes me as meaningless and boring?*

Solomon explained his belief that even though humanity carries such a burden as it toils day in and day out, there is still much in life to enjoy. Apparently one of his greatest yearnings—both for himself and for others—was that people might "be happy and do good while they live" (v. 12). He said a great source of contentment in life can be found in eating, drinking, and performing satisfying work (v. 13). How can one find real contentment in the common activities of life? By believing that such daily activity—indeed, all of life itself—is a gift of God.

The Teacher must have recognized that we people can only believe that life is a gift of God when we humbly revere the Lord and place our confidence and faith in Him. We must realize the permanence of God's work and that "nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it" (v. 14).

Closing out this line of thinking with a brief poem, Solomon then took a broader view of history as it affects people. In history we can seek God's will further. In doing so, we begin to discover that history is more than just facts and events repeating themselves without meaning. Things do happen in certain patterns again and again, but with faith in God's sovereignty, we can learn from them in ways that will benefit our behavior today.

We can also be certain that God will "call the past to account" (v. 15). This may be both disturbing and comforting. It is disturbing in that it reminds us that if we have not asked God to forgive our own wrongs against others, He will hold them against us. It is comforting in that it means God will not overlook those who have suffered evil at the hands of others, especially believers and innocent people who have been persecuted or slaughtered.

When people visit the Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, they quickly see the extent of suffering some have inflicted on others. They can only hope in the promise of justice given in the Teacher's words "God will call the past to account."

C Wondering about Injustice and Death (3:16–22)

In the place of judgment—
wickedness was there,
in the place of justice—
wickedness was there.
—Ecclesiastes 3:16

Solomon continued his survey of vanity and meaninglessness, this time examining the courts of law. He pointed out that here was where people grasped for power rather than justice, and then they used that

power to oppress others. As a result, wickedness reigned over the place of judgment instead of justice and compassion (v. 16).

Rather than giving in to pessimism and despair, however, the Teacher voiced some hope. Referring to a higher court—the justice of God—he stated his belief that the Lord would judge both righteous and wicked. Perhaps the wicked could get away with their evil deeds for the time being, but in the end God's justice will triumph (v. 17).

Solomon's thoughts then turned to another test all people must face. This test is the awareness that we all must die, as do the animals (v. 18). Both humans and beasts have the same fate. They die alike, and in that respect, people have no advantage over animals. Because this is so, the Teacher said once again that "everything is meaningless" (v. 19).

In a way, the question of death is just as difficult to deal with as is the question of injustice—at least for those who have no faith in God. For if there is no ultimate justice, and if we simply die off like snakes and sparrows, then life would indeed seem to be meaningless.

Human bodies may be of a different shape than those of animals, but the bodies of both are made of basically the same minerals and chemicals. Thus the fate of both is exactly the same: "All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return" (v. 20).

He then asked a startling question: "Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?" (v. 21; the Hebrew for "spirit" here more literally translates "breath of life"). Essentially, if one perceives death only by what is observable, there is no demonstratable difference between the death of animal and man—there is no quantifying a soul.

The phrases "rises upward" and "goes down into the earth" (v. 21) highlight the distinction between humans and animals. "Rises upward" seems to imply that people have an afterlife that is dealt with by God. "Goes down," on the other hand, seems to imply that animals cease to exist.

The Teacher may have meant to startle his audience into action by posing such a question. Instead of their giving up in the face of certain death, he desired for them to make the most of their opportunity to live for God while they had the spirit of life in them.

He elaborated on this desire in verse 22. Criticizing the despairing attitude that focuses only on death, he urged people to make every minute count. He told them to enjoy the performance of their responsibilities while they may, if for no other reason than that it is their lot.

Thus Solomon reaffirmed that, even amidst injustice and death, God's perfect plan is at work. Our time to serve Him fully and joyfully is now, so let's make the most of the life that we have.

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I make more productive use of my time?*

Ecclesiastes 4:1–5:7 in Brief

Chapter 4 features a series of observations, proverbs, and parables offered by Solomon about issues such as oppression, envy, selfishness, and political intrigue. These topics appear to be loosely tied together around the theme of personal power and living selfishly for oneself.

Ecclesiastes 5:1–7 provides an interlude in the Teacher's quest for meaning. In contrast to the pursuit of power, we find a place of quiet worship—God's house. Solomon called his listeners to come there and seek deeper answers to the questions of life through worship and prayer and listening to God in silence.

d A Condemnation of Greed (5:8–17)

Whoever loves money never has enough;
whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income.
This too is meaningless.
—Ecclesiastes 5:10

Solomon moved on to a new topic, condemning the love of money (not money itself). He was concerned about greed.

Returning to a discussion of power and oppression, he first condemned the greed and corruption of various political authorities. He explained how the poor are not only oppressed, but their justice and rights are denied as well (v. 8). The Teacher knew that the poor's suffering stemmed from a web of political intrigue in which one official lorded it over those under him, and yet that official was also lorded over by even higher officials.

The bureaucracy extended all the way up to the king—in this case, all the way up to Solomon himself. And Solomon admitted that he benefited more than anyone else from fields that he did not cultivate (v. 9). In this discussion he was not promoting an alternative to his system of government. Rather, he was simply pointing out the corruption and lack of fairness in both the political system and its officials.

The root of this evil was the love of money (v. 10; compare 1 Tim. 6:10). The Teacher realized that the love of and quest for wealth is never satisfied. The more people have, the more they want. No income is high enough for the person whose desire is for more money. And yet, Solomon said, such a desire is meaningless (Eccl. 5:10).

The Teacher then contrasted the attitudes of greedy wealthy people and of hardworking poor people. He said a greedy person keeps a very close watch over his goods, anxiously striving for more. But he is so worried about making a profit that he cannot sleep. In contrast, a poor laborer works hard but is content with what he has. As a result of his contentment, he enjoys sweet sleep whether he eats a little or a lot (vv. 11–12).

Ask Yourself . . . *Is my attitude toward money more like that of a greedy wealthy person or like that of a poor but contented laborer?*

To illustrate his earlier point, Solomon told a tragic tale about a miserable miser who hoarded goods to such an extent that it caused harm to himself (v. 13). The miser had amassed such great wealth, that maintaining and increasing it warped his character. When misfortune or calamity struck, the miser lost everything he had lived for. In addition, he had nothing left for his son to inherit (v. 14).

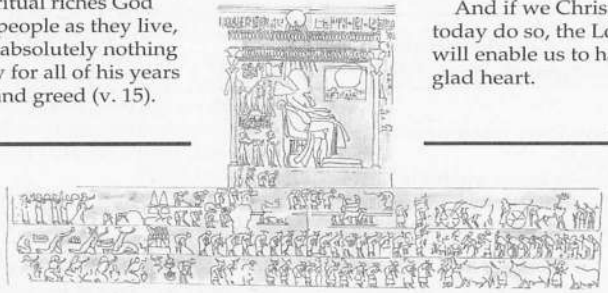
In this way, the miser personified the truth that a person enters this life naked and leaves it in the same manner at death (v. 15). Because he failed to concentrate on God and the spiritual riches God grants people as they live, he had absolutely nothing to show for all of his years of toil and greed (v. 15).

As the tale continues, we learn that the miser, by devoting his entire life for the useless purpose of accumulating wealth, which was lost anyway, wasted the time he had been given to live. In the words of Solomon, he may as well have spent all his days toiling "for the wind" (v. 16). Therefore, though the miser sought wealth, all he really gained from his worrisome labors was sadness, "frustration, affliction and anger" (v. 17).

Ecclesiastes 5:18–20 in Brief

The Teacher said no one has to be like the miserable miser. He urged the people in his audience to accept their lot in life—whether they be wealthy or poor—and to enjoy life as God has given it.

And if we Christians today do so, the Lord will enable us to have a glad heart.



This Egyptian artwork, perhaps from the fourteenth century B.C., illustrates the kind of royal administration presided over by kings and described by Solomon (Eccl. 5:8–9). The main figure at the top is Pharaoh Amenhotep IV. Below him are the king's ministers, who are over members of the royal guard, who are over senior officials, who are over tribute-paying commoners.

Advice for a Fulfilling Life

Ecclesiastes 6–8

Ecclesiastes 6 in Brief

The Teacher once again examined the nature of an unfulfilled and meaningless life. Wealth and children do not in themselves bring meaning to life, he argued. Since a human being's appetite is never satisfied, people are constantly grasping for something more out of life, only to come to the end of life realizing they have not lived. The point Solomon was apparently making is that, since we cannot fully take command of ourselves in the present, and since we do not know the future, we need to place ourselves in God's hands and trust that He knows what is good for us.

What Is Good for a Person (7:1–10)

A good name is better than fine perfume,
and the day of death better than the day of birth.
—Ecclesiastes 7:1

"Who knows what is good for a person in life, during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow?" (6:12). This question the Teacher now set out to answer. He would attempt to do so by devising a string of proverbs.

The first set of proverbs (7:1–6) describes the value of a serious view of life. Of course, it was not Solomon's intent to imply there is no place for laughter in our lives.

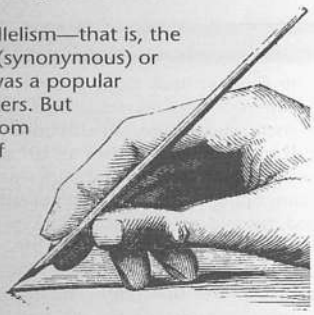
First, the Teacher advised that just as having a good reputation is of greater value than simply smelling good, so death is better than life because life is meaningless (v. 1). Solomon taught that one can encounter a renewed respect for life by coming into contact with death, which he called "the destiny of everyone" (v. 2). Therefore, he recommended that people spend more time at funerals than at feasts. Every funeral we attend is a forerunner of our own. What may be said at our funeral and how we will be remembered is determined by how we live today.

In this context of discovering the true meaning of life, the Teacher said, "Frustration is better than laughter" (v. 3). To put it another

Solomon the Writer

The Book of Ecclesiastes baffles many modern literary critics because the writing style sometimes appears discontinuous and unconnected. In chapter 7 of Ecclesiastes, for instance, is a series of proverbs that may seem disjointed and perhaps even unrelated to each other.

For this reason, some critics contend (from an arguably rather narrow-minded point of view) that other writers besides Solomon inserted sayings that do not agree with what Solomon was trying to convey.



However, the writer's use of parallelism—that is, the repeating of an idea the same way (synonymous) or in a contrasting way (antithetic)—was a popular technique among Near Eastern writers. But by doing so, he tended to depart from the more sequentially logical way of thinking that we in the Western world are accustomed to.

Commentator Dennis Kinlaw has answered modern literary critics' complaints about Ecclesiastes by saying, "It seems strange that modern scholars feel forced to impose on such an ancient text our methods and mentality. The seeming disjointedness may be the greatest mark of authenticity here." Indeed, all we have to do is compare this to Proverbs.

way, the wise should be willing to face those who are in mourning (v. 4). We learn far more about life from those who are hurting than we do from those who constantly seek pleasure. Those who restrict themselves to the shallow life in the "house of pleasure" Solomon called "fools." Therefore, once again he reiterated that a funeral is more enlightening than a party.

Second, the Teacher said the pain of being reprimanded by a wise person teaches us more about how to live than does listening to the songs of happy-go-lucky fools (v. 5). He explained his point further by describing the gleeful behavior of fools as being like the "crackling of thorns under the pot" (v. 6). When placed in a fire, thorns burn quickly, letting off popping noises and bright light, but not a lot of heat. Before generating enough heat to warm a

pot, the fire dies out.

In the same way, a foolish, superficial approach to life brings much noise and a flash of light, but it is short-lived and soon fizzles out. It is ineffective when the real problems of life are confronted. Those whose approach to life is superficial tend to focus on the frivolities of living, but choose to run away rather than courageously and honestly cope with suffering and loss.

Ask Yourself . . . *Is my approach to life too superficial or too serious? How can God help me attain a proper balance in my life?*

The brief proverb recorded in verse 7 offers some practical advice on what is good for us in our business and governmental dealings. We are told not to use a position of power or influence for personal advantage. Solomon said corruption and bribery end up defiling people from the inside out. His rule of thumb was to keep morally clean.

The Teacher went on to advise his audience to practice patience rather than exhibit pride. Certainly patience is more useful than pride in helping us see our intentions and endeavors through to the end (v. 8).

Part of practicing patience is restraining temper. The Teacher told his hearers not to lose their temper over what other people do. Instead, he urged them to be forbearing, since "anger resides in the lap of fools" (v. 9).

Solomon's next piece of proverbial advice deals with people's view of the past. He said we should not keep looking back to "the old days," regardless of whether they were better or worse than the present days (v. 10). Though we should have the wisdom to learn from the past, we are to live the present to the fullest. Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish Christian philosopher, put it this way: "It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards."

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I tend to live in the past? If so, how might I change so that I live more fully in the present?*

A thistle plant. In ancient Israel, thistles grew in abundance. When thrown into a fire, this thorny plant quickly bursts into flames and burns out. The Teacher compared the gleeful behavior of fools to the "crackling of thorns under the pot" (Eccl. 7:6).

b Being Wise, Fearing God (7:11–20)

Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful than ten rulers in a city.
—Ecclesiastes 7:19

Still answering the question "What is good for a person in life?" (6:12), the Teacher continued his series of proverbs. At this point, he addressed the superiority of wisdom.

Most people seem to think that if they suddenly came into a lot of money, their problems would be solved. Solomon advised to the contrary that wisdom was of much more value than money. He said wisdom is like an inheritance in that it benefits whoever receives it (7:11). In fact, wisdom is a better "shelter" than wealth because it "preserves those who have it" (v. 12). In short, the Teacher said that if we seek the good life, we should pursue wisdom more than money.

Ask Yourself . . . If I were to create a list of three things that make up "the good life," what would I include?

Verse 13 represents a slight shift in Solomon's advice on what is good for people. He introduced God's name for the first time in chapter 7. Up to this point, he had been giving solid advice appealing to the common sense of anyone, regardless of religious conviction. But now he wanted to go further. He wanted to show that God is at the heart of everything that is good for us. Hence, he advised, "Consider what God has done" (v. 13).

What the Teacher wanted his audience to consider was, in a nutshell, that God is sovereign. An examination of His hand at work in the world and in history reveals His dominion over everything. No one can alter what He has done (v. 13b).

If we want to know what's good for us, we should consider this truth in both good times and bad, because God is author of both (v. 14). Everything is in His hands, including the future, about which we can discern nothing for sure (v. 14).

Even with the knowledge that God is in control, it is never easy to see a good and likable person die too soon while another person lives on in spite of a life full of wrongdoing (v. 15). This illustrates what Solomon had been saying all along—that life is filled with apparent injustices and hard questions.

Rather than offer answers, the Teacher simply advised his hearers not to fool themselves by depending upon their self-righteousness or wisdom, lest they be confounded and appalled (a more accurate translation from the Hebrew verb *tishomeem* than "destroyed," v. 16). Much as we saw with Job, righteousness and wisdom do not guarantee God's granting one an easy life. Indeed, Job's counselors were confounded because they held just such a simplistic view.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I guilty of oversimplifying God's grace, believing His blessings to be payment for righteous

living? How might a non-believer be confounded by such a view of God?

Apparently balancing his comment about being "overrighteous," Solomon also taught, "Do not be overwicked," as if the long life of the wicked (v. 17) suggests license to sin. Far from implying it is okay for people to be moderately wicked, the Teacher warned against modeling ourselves after either hypocrites (who fool themselves in their self-righteousness) or evil men (foolishly pursuing destruction; v. 17). What is most important is that we center our life on God, avoiding either self-centered "extreme" (v. 18).

If we fear God and avoid prideful extremes as the Teacher instructed, then we will accumulate wisdom naturally. We will become wise, not from knowledge, arguments, or facts, but from experience. This wisdom in the fear of God will give us an inner strength greater than the kind of mind power we might see in a council of several important persons, or even in a think tank (v. 19).

The next proverb brings up the issue of sinless perfection. In a sense, it is related to the warning against being overrighteous (v. 16). Solomon wanted to make sure that everyone understood "there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins." (v. 20). Such a statement is a forerunner of Paul's classic commentary on the human condition in Romans 3:10–18, 23. Only when we discover our bankruptcy before God can we avail ourselves of Christ's riches.

C Losing Hope of Finding Wisdom (7:21–8:1)

Who is like the wise?
Who knows the explanation of things?

—Ecclesiastes 8:1

Turning again to the pursuit of wisdom, the Teacher admitted frankly that wisdom and its practitioners are not easy to find. And although wisdom is of great value, without God's special revelation it has definite limits.

But before talking about pursuing wisdom, Solomon told yet another proverb, mentioning another practical thing that is good for wise people to do. Namely, he said wise people should not take part in or listen to gossip (vv. 21–22). If they do, then they are apt to hear those closest to them criticizing them.

The Teacher stressed how common it is for vindictiveness to give rise to criticism. Just as one is likely to hear himself or herself being cursed, so that person must realize that he or she has succumbed to cursing others. Everyone, no matter how wise, has talked callously about other people. Indicative of our sinful nature, participating in such talk unsettles our tranquillity.

Ask Yourself . . . *When was the last time I found myself ensnared in gossip? How might I become more wise in this area?*

Solomon felt that without God, pure wisdom cannot be found or attained. Though he was determined to acquire it, somehow it avoided him. It seemed always out of reach (v. 23). Recognizing it as something "most profound," he had failed to discover it and questioned whether anyone could discover it (v. 24).

Despite wisdom's apparent elusiveness, the Teacher continued to diligently search for it. In fact, the limits of his wisdom drove him to further consider the character of people. He set out to "understand," "investigate," and "search out" both wisdom and its opposite—"the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly" (v. 25).

One area in which he felt men were particularly unwise and wicked was in their vulnerability to wicked women. The Teacher said that a deceitful woman is more bitter than death itself. Indeed, she is like a trap (v. 26). "The man who pleases God will escape her," he said, "but the sinner she will ensnare" (v. 26). Solomon no doubt saw himself as among the sinners here. Pagan women had been instrumental in his disobedience to God and would contribute to his downfall (see 1 Kings 11:1–13).

As the Teacher conveyed evidence from his search for wisdom in the "scheme of things" (Eccl. 7:27), he used hyperbole (a figure of speech employing exaggeration) for emphasis. Solomon was speaking figuratively when he said he could find only "one upright man among a thousand" (v. 28). Significantly, the Hebrew word Solomon used here is *adam*, which characteristically was used in the generic sense of "human" or "mankind." His point was that one who truly pleases God is very, very rare.

At first glance, Solomon's addition "not one upright woman among them all" (v. 28) might seem very disturbing. But it's important to understand Solomon's point is not literally that while one out of every thousand men is pleasing to God, no women are. Such would be inconsistent with the rest of Solomon's argument, not to mention the rest of God's Word.

Commentator Donald Glenn explains how Solomon used two literary devices: (1) parallelism, in which the generic term *adam* is further emphasized to include womankind; and (2) a building up in sequence from a lesser point to the main point. In effect: "a man, and yes a woman pleasing God is not only a rarity, it's an impossibility" (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, Walvood and Zuck, ed. David C Cook Publishing, p. 996).

Ultimately Solomon insisted that all humans fall short. He said that God created all of us with the capacity to please Him, but we have wandered off His intended course "in search of many schemes" (v. 29). Indeed, we are all guilty of pursuing our own solutions rather than seeking the fear and wisdom of the Lord.

The Teacher then shook off his pessimism and offered a portrait in miniature of what a wise person might look like—if and when one

Women in the Bible

The books of both the Old and New Testaments show a great deal of respect for women, treating them as equal to men in many instances (Gen. 1:27; Gal. 3:28). In other instances, women are shown performing both lesser and greater roles than men (see Judg. 4–5; Rom. 16:1, 2; 1 Tim. 2:11-15).

The main duties of women in Bible times related to the household (Gen. 24:13; John 4:7). Capable women receive rich praise in Proverbs 31:10–31.

The Mosaic law and other divine revelation gave women many rights they didn't have outside Israel. Marriage was held sacred (Mal. 2:14–16), and the wife was to be honored (Prov. 5:18; Eccl. 9:9). The New Testament holds that marriage is sanctified and permanent, permitting divorce only in rare, specific cases (Matt. 19:8, 9). Here, too, may be found the teaching that women are to be honored highly by their husbands (Eph. 5:25–31).

was actually found (8:1). He said this person would be able to talk intelligently about many things in life (v. 1). Indeed, he or she would know the solution to the questions and problems of life. In addition, this person would not appear harsh, but would be softened and brightened by wisdom (v. 1).

Was Solomon describing his own face here? No one knows for sure. But what about our own faces? Are they bright and softened? Is this what we look like when we submit to the Lord and fear God? It's an attractive thought.

Ecclesiastes 8:2–17 in Brief

The Teacher once again returned to familiar themes—God's sovereignty; the unanswered questions of good, evil, and injustice; and the future. He said we should obey the Lord as we would a king with absolute power, especially because we do not understand all God's ways. He also advised that the only way to enjoy this life is to accept it with joy and faith as a gift from God. We can do this despite the fact that even wise people can never claim to discover the entire meaning of life.

11 Wisdom for the Present and Future

Ecclesiastes 9–12

a Good and Evil Happen to All (9:1–12)

The race is not to the swift
or the battle to the strong,
nor does food come to the wise
or wealth to the brilliant
or favor to the learned;
but time and chance happen to
them all.

—Ecclesiastes 9:11

Having given his audience advice about how to live a fulfilling life, the Teacher's thoughts turned again to death. He was especially sobered by the thought that death comes to all people, regardless of their lifestyle or whether they applied themselves to good or evil. All life is in God's hands, we are assured. But no one knows exactly what to expect at the end of life—"whether love or hate awaits" us (v. 1).

Thus one of the realities of life is that the same fate is in store for all people (v. 2). Death eventually comes, bringing an end to all life. Solomon inserted a brief poem supporting this fact, showing that the assurance of dying is the same for the "good" and "the sinful," for those who pledged an oath to God's covenant and those who were afraid to do so (v. 2).

This reality is repeated in the next verse—"The same destiny overtakes all" (v. 3). He explained that all people are bent toward evil. Quite certainly pride and selfishness often determine what we will do in various situations. In some respects, our sinful nature follows us all the days of our lives, up to the point that we "join the dead" (v. 3).

Solomon clung to his belief that how we live our lives definitely matters. And as long as there is life in us, there is "hope" (v. 4)—evidently the hope of finding enjoyment in life. This enjoyment of the good life that God grants to people is one of the themes the Teacher returns to again and again (see 2:24–25; 3:22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–9). Thus he could say that "even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!" (v. 4).

The Teacher affirmed the value of life, observing that even the despised dog was better off in its dishonor than the honored, but dead, lion. For one thing, the living have consciousness and awareness,

Live Dogs and Dead Lions

The Hebrew people's attitude toward dogs was not anything like our modern appreciation for the domesticated creature known as "man's best friend." Generally in Scripture dogs are referred to as wild, unclean scavengers who eat garbage, dead animals (Ex. 22:31), human flesh, and blood (1 Kings 14:11; 22:38). Indeed, the Bible has many unflattering images of dogs (2 Sam. 3:8; Isa. 66:3; Ps. 22:16, 20; 59:6, 14; Prov. 26:11).

In contrast, the Hebrews revered the strength and prowess of the lion. Describing the people of Israel, the Lord spoke through Balaam to say, "The people rise like a lioness; they rouse themselves like a lion that does not rest till he devours his prey and drinks the blood of his victims" (Num. 23:24).

Though the dog was despised and the lion revered, the Teacher in effect said a live scavenger is better off than a dead king among beasts (Eccl. 9:4).

but "the dead know nothing" and are soon forgotten (v. 5). They've lost any potential for further affecting the rewards God gives for faithfulness to Him.

Another point Solomon was making is that everything about the dead—their love, hate, and jealousies, for example—has disappeared. Their earthly lives have been lived and have now ceased to exist. Thus they will never again take part in anything that happens among the living on earth (v. 6).

As long as we have breath, then, we are to live in the present. The Teacher's next words dealt with that issue again. What was his doctrine of life and work for the present? Believing that God favors us, we should make the most of and enjoy what we have, especially in terms of food, clothing, and family (vv. 7–9). "Eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart," it seems Solomon was advising. "Wear most comfortable clothes, and celebrate each day as a gift from God." Doing so will be enough to give us satisfaction and gladness even when surrounded by the meaningless occurrences of life. Indeed, the Teacher said again that enjoying the life God has given us is our lot in life (v. 9).

And how should our work fit into our scheme of life? Solomon advised his hearers to work hard for a living as long as they had breath (v. 10). It is clear that he wanted people to enjoy both their labor and the fruits of their labor. He urged them to live

active and energetic lives, to strive to become informed, to work at becoming skillful. "Work hard," the Teacher in effect told his audience. "Then rest well. Be glad, but also be content. Enjoy every aspect of the life God has given you, remembering that it doesn't last very long."

Ask Yourself . . . *What is my attitude toward work? How does it compare with the Teacher's philosophy of work?*

Solomon next confronted more of the harsh realities of life. He noted that whatever we add to the life we've been given—hard work, strength, intelligence, and wealth, among other traits—life doesn't always turn out the way we think it should. The fastest runner doesn't always win the race. The strongest military force doesn't always win the battle. Nor do the wise and intelligent always get an appropriate share of food or wealth. In short, the Teacher said that no matter what we have or what we do, a time for failure and disaster comes to all people (v. 11).

With a quick glance at newspapers or at television news reports today, we can see that the world Solomon described goes on. Children are killed by gunfire in drive-by shootings; star athletes with a dynamic witness for Christ are struck down by cancer; parents die in car accidents leaving young children behind. How do we respond to all this?

God's more enduring word to us is to not give up, regardless of the pain and loss we suffer. The Bible advises, "Keep on believing and doing your best. Trust that your calling is to live as witnesses to the light amidst the darkness of the world."

No one knows when disaster or death will strike. We are as helpless in our trying to avoid calamity and eventually death itself, as are "fish . . . in a cruel net" or "birds . . . in a snare" (v. 12). Even so, our task is simply to wake up each morning and place the day in God's hands, trusting in His plan for each of us.

Ecclesiastes 9:13–11:6 in Brief

The Teacher resumed a monologue on his concern for wisdom, beginning with a story of a poor wise man who saved his small city and then was forgotten (9:13–16). Using this story as a background, he then presented a series of proverbs in which he reflected on a variety of topics, including the need to be wise in our relationships, the need to plan well, and the need to be careful with our words (9:17–10:20).

Chapter 11 opens with more proverbs, some of these giving examples of how we need to prepare and act in order to realize the results we desire. Of course, room must always be left for failure even with the best preparations and actions. Risks abound in this uncertain world. But just as we raise a child not knowing how he or she was formed in the womb, so we are to seek to do God's will even though we don't understand His ways.

Pondering Youth and Old Age (11:7–12:8)

Remember your Creator
in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
and the years approach when
you will say,
"I find no pleasure in them."
—Ecclesiastes 12:1

Apparently as Solomon realized that he was coming to the end of his words, he began to move into his closing statements. At this point in his teaching, he looked back to his youth at the beginning of his life and then ahead to old age at the end.

He taught that young people should enjoy their lives while the light of the sun is still bright and "sweet" to them (v. 7). No one knows how long the sun's light will shine on his or her life; therefore, all people should seek to enjoy each day (v. 8).

We are not to live naively, however. We are to live with the mature awareness that into every life there comes darkness and death (v. 8). For many, unfortunately, this makes their lives seem meaningless (v. 8). But for those whose lives are centered on God, this sobering knowledge will merely add depth to their living.

Thus the Teacher's advice to young people was to "be happy" (v. 9). In fact, he encouraged the youthful members of his audience to be joyful and "follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see" (v. 9).

At first glance, this advice may seem to be advocating hedonism (idolizing pleasure), or at least giving youth a license for immorality. But that was certainly not Solomon's intent. He tempered his advice with a reminder: "Know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment" (v. 9). In other words, young people are encouraged to be free and joyful as long as their behavior is within the context of moral responsibility.

As they pursue their God-given freedom and joy, youth are to put aside worries and anxiety and do away with "the troubles of your body" (v. 10). By God's grace, the young can enjoy life this way because before they realize it, their youthfulness will be gone. In that sense, youth is meaningless because it does not have lasting value.

Ask Yourself . . . Whatever my age, am I able to enjoy each day as God gives it to me? Why or why not?

Perhaps the highlight of Solomon's advice to the young is to "remember your Creator" (12:1). Once again the Teacher did not want his audience to assume that freedom and joy could be equated with lawlessness and folly. His advice did not mean that they could forget their Creator. It meant that they were to combine freedom and joy with moral responsibility in order to make the most out of life.

Thus Ecclesiastes reminds youth today that the farther they move

away from God, the farther away they move from the real solutions to life's problems. Solomon would have had youth wake up to this truth while they are still young.

The onset of old age, the Teacher went on to say, is an especially good reason why people need to remember their Creator while they are still young. Days of trouble are coming, Solomon promised—days when old age will make it more difficult to participate in and find pleasure in life (v. 1). Thus the Lord wants us to learn to live for Him early in life, to begin exercising our faith when we are young, so that we can give Him our best and enjoy all the wonders of living.

Having made the transition from advice for the young to a portrayal of what our elderly years are like, the Teacher then elaborated, describing old age in some of the most beautiful and yet sorrowful poetry in literature (vv. 2–8). Not everyone in our age of modern medicine will experience the drastic loss of faculties described here, but the point is clear. In old age we are not what we used to be.

First, Solomon characterized old age as being like the clouds that return to darken the sky after it has rained. This darkness is in contrast to the light given off by the sun, moon, and stars (v. 2).

The next series of images (vv. 3–4) can be taken at two levels. On a more literal level, when old age comes, those who work as house servants are not as strong. Indeed, they become shaky and bent. Longtime grinders of grain have to stop their work because their eyesight grows dim. Even the sleep of the elderly is not always peaceful. Though they close up their houses at night, their sleep does not last long because they are awakened by the first song of the birds—and that in spite of the fact that their hearing has faded.

Some Bible interpreters believe these two verses were meant to be allegorical, presenting images referring to the decay of old age. Thus the housekeepers are thought to refer to the arms and hands. The

An almond tree. The Teacher used the white flowering of an almond tree to represent the gray hair of old age.

grinders represent teeth, and "those looking through the windows" are the eyes. The "doors to the street" refers to the loss of hearing, and the birds singing in the morning to an elderly person's faint voice.

Verse 5 presents two literal examples of old age, followed by three metaphors from nature. The Teacher apparently considered the fear of heights and the fear of busy streets as natural fears of the elderly.

"When the almond tree blossoms" most likely refers to when the hair of an old person turns white. Though the base of the petals on a blossoming bitter almond tree turn pink, the outer tips turn white, making the entire tree appear white.

The comparison of old age to a grasshopper that drags itself along the ground probably symbolizes the immobility of old age, when one is not able to move as quickly as before.

The Hebrew word translated "desire" refers literally to the caper berry, an obscure fruit thought in ancient times to stimulate romantic desire. The same word, however, was used in several references to an appetizer, perhaps suggesting that the desire mentioned here is for food. In either case, the image reflects an old person's declining appetites.

When people reach this point in life, they are close to dying and going to their eternal home (v. 5). Solomon reminded his audience of how mourners wander through the streets, wailing in grief for the person who has died. Thus before they reached this point in their lives, the Teacher told his hearers once again to remember their Creator (v. 6).

Like the poetic images of verses 3 and 4, the poetic images of verse 6 are interpreted in at least two ways. In either case, these images are impressions of total collapse. The silver wire from which the golden lamp hangs is snapped, and the lamp (representing life) is broken. The clay pitcher is smashed so that it can no longer carry the water of life. Even the wooden waterwheel that drew the water has been broken.

According to another interpretation, the silver cord is the human spine, while the lamp is the head. The pitcher is the heart, which will no longer carry life-giving blood, and the wheel represents the lungs (carrying air), the heart (carrying blood), or the organs of digestion.

Having used imagery to describe the inevitable death of people, Solomon then showed the ultimate results of the breakdown of the body. In death, the original components, or "the dust," will return "to the ground it came from" (v. 7). At the same time, the spirit, or soul, "returns to God who gave it."

All his talk of decline and death must have depressed the Teacher. "Meaningless! Meaningless!" he cried (v. 8), just as he had done at the beginning of his monologue (1:2). And yet there was still more for him to say. Next, he would bring his address to a close by revealing the purpose of humanity.

C Final Words (12:9–14)

Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of all mankind.
—Ecclesiastes 12:13

Most of Ecclesiastes is a first-person recording of Solomon's own experiences and thoughts. Beginning in 12:9, however, the point of view shifts suddenly. Here the writer gave a positive recommendation about the teachings contained in this book. The recommendation tells us that though the Teacher examined life skeptically, he was not a cynic or a hedonist. God was real to him despite his many questions, and he knew that God cared for His people and would fulfill His will in the end.

For the first time since 1:1, a detailed description was given of this Teacher. A wise man, Solomon did not hoard his vast wisdom, but willingly taught what he knew to other people (12:9). Indeed, he compiled proverbs so that others might have the written words from which to learn the truth (v. 9). He was also conscientious and industrious, avoiding dullness or artificiality, but seeking out words that were genuine and truthful (v. 10).

Continuing his description of the Teacher and his teaching, the writer said these words of truth will have two effects. First, they will be like "goads" (v. 11)—stakes used to prod animals—in that they will impel people to move along the right path. Second, they will be like "firmly embedded nails," solidly establishing godly wisdom. These truths were taught as "by one shepherd," or as if the Lord Himself

So Many Books

Books in Solomon's day were not like our modern paperbacks or hardcover books, with covers and pages. The "books" referred to in Ecclesiastes 12:12 were long documents written on animal skin or papyrus—on one or both sides—and rolled up as a scroll. The first mention of scrolls written by the Hebrew people was sometime after their exodus from Egypt, a nation which has a long history of "making many books."

had spoken them to His people. In fact, the writer warned against believing anything added to the truths of the Teacher (v. 12).

Of course, other teachings will always abound, the writer added. False and deceptive teachings will consistently appear on the scene because "of making many books there is no end," and the study of such errant works will only increase a person's weariness (v. 12).

How do we build in ourselves, our children, and our friends the wisdom to know what is wise and true, as opposed to what is false and deceptive? It isn't easy, and it takes much discipline, prayer for guidance from the Holy Spirit, feedback from mature Christians, and of course, reading.

Ask Yourself . . . *What am I reading these days? What questions do I ask myself to decide whether the words are true or false?*

Whether Solomon said these words (vv. 9–12) about himself or a disciple of his wrote them about him, we do not know. We do know, however, that this kind of tribute was common in ancient literature. The prophets quite often claimed authority because they knew their words came from the Lord Himself. Similarly, the writer claimed that the Teacher had obtained his wisdom from God.

After this reintroduction of Solomon's credentials, the writer recorded the Teacher's summary of how to approach life and living. Solomon concluded that if we really want to know how to live in a world that is unjust and meaningless, we are compelled to "fear God and keep his commandments" (v. 13). As a matter of fact, that is our entire duty.

Ask Yourself . . . *To what extent am I committed to my duty to fear God and keep His commandments?*

The reason to pursue this duty is that, despite the endless cycle of history, despite the evil and greed, despite even death, what we do in life does matter. We know that what we do matters because God cares enough to judge our every thought and action (v. 14). Thus the foolish, vain, and wicked things we have done will come before God's eyes for judgment. But so also will the kind, good, and gentle acts we have done. As the Teacher had said earlier in his monologue, "I said to myself, 'God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed'" (3:17).

Therefore, the Teacher brought to an end his teaching about life. He had proven that although human efforts seem to lack value, we should enjoy life in the fear of the Lord, whose first gift to us is life itself.

The Song of Songs

According to 1 Kings 4:32, King Solomon composed 1,005 songs. Many Bible scholars assume that the Song of Songs (sometimes called the Song of Solomon) is one of these.

Whereas the songs of Solomon probably covered a broad range of themes, this song is specifically about love. It portrays love's subtlety and mystery, its beauty and pleasures, its captivation and enchantment. It reveals the romantic feelings of a woman and a man.

The Song of Songs also portrays the power of love. In fact, in this book the power of love is shown to rival the strength of death itself. Thus one of the main lessons to be learned from a study of the Song of Songs is that God intends for powerful love to be a hallmark of a marital relationship.

Author and Date

It seems most reasonable to accept Solomon as the God-inspired composer, especially since the title refers to Solomon by name (S. of S. 1:1). In fact, his name appears many times throughout the book (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11, 12).

There are some who question Solomon's authorship of the book, arguing that the real author used Solomon's name to give prestige to his work. They follow various lines of reasoning, such as pointing to the presence of some rare words. However, these lines of reasoning are not convincing to most conservative scholars.

As for when the book was written, those who are uncertain of Solomon's authorship are likewise divided over when the song was composed. But since it is most reasonable to accept that Solomon was the composer, the date seems just as clear: Solomon's reign extended from about 970 to about 930 B.C.

Interpretations

Both Jewish and Christian theologians have held the Song of Songs in high esteem, though perhaps no other book of the Old Testament has been subjected to so many different interpretations. There are three basic approaches.

The Song of Songs has often been taken as *allegorical*. In this interpretation the lovers in this song are viewed not as historical figures but as symbolic characters. Jewish

Song of Songs at a Glance

Title:	First Meeting:	Second Meeting:	Third Meeting:	Fourth Meeting:	Fifth Meeting:	Conclusion:
Solomon's Song of Songs (1:1)	The Beauty of Love (1:2–2:7)	The Call of Love (2:8–3:5)	The Approach of Love (3:6–5:1)	The Readiness of Love (5:2–6:3)	The Answer of Love (6:4–8:4)	The Seal of Love (8:5–14)

interpreters who took the allegorical approach have seen the characters as representing God and Israel, while Christian interpreters have seen them as representing Christ and the church.

A somewhat related interpretation sees the Song of Songs as typological. In other words, the characters in this song are accepted as historical, but their love is taken to also illustrate the love God has for His people. Christians have seen in the love relationship between the young bride and groom the love that Jesus, the Bridegroom, has for His bride, the church.

When taken at its face value—the *natural* or *literal* interpretation—this song appears to portray an actual case of romantic love. (This is the interpretation that our Bible study series primarily follows.) Of course, this interpretation does not preclude the author's use of metaphorical language, in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another. Thus when the author referred to physical appearance, he may also have been focusing on character, personality, and so on.

Plot and Characters

There is no clear plot in the Song of Songs as there would be in a play or a story. Interpreters have therefore suggested several different story lines.

This Bible Study series takes the view that the poem shows the love between King Solomon and one of his wives. The poem contains a cluster of five meetings in which the lovers pass through courtship, their wedding, the consummation of their love in marriage, and later occasions in which they renew their love.

According to this analysis of the action, there are three sources of the speeches in the poem: the bride, her attendants, and the groom.

12 The Courtship of the Lovers

Song of Songs 1:1–5:1

a In Praise of Love (1:1–8)

We rejoice and delight in you;
we will praise your love more than wine.
How right they are to adore you!
—Song of Songs 1:4

"Solomon's Song of Songs" (v. 1) is a collection of brief poems about love and marriage. The 117 verses of this song make up some of the most well-known love poetry in all of world literature.

Throughout these poems are words from three sources. First is the young Shulammite bride who talked about her love boldly and openly, evoking the innocence of the love between Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (see Gen. 2:24–25). Second is the groom, apparently King Solomon, who candidly expressed his joy and admiration of his new bride. Third is a group of the bride's friends. The mention of these young Jewish maidens throughout the Song of Songs signifies that the commitment made by a man and woman is not solely a private one, but a public one as well. What a couple commits to in their marriage vows will affect others in society.

Ask Yourself . . . How have other people's marriages had an effect on me?

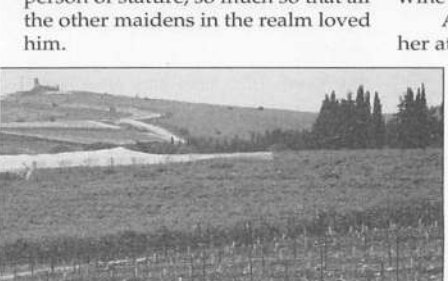
Why was this book called "Solomon's Song of Songs" (1:1)? The phrase in Hebrew simply means that this song was the greatest of all of the songs Solomon composed. One Bible translator rendered the phrase as "Solomon's sublime song."

In the opening lines of the actual song (vv. 2–4), the young woman expressed her joy aloud and called out anxiously to her betrothed to come away with her. Thus she was the first character to speak, and in fact, most of the lines of the song come from her. She seemed to feel she was on an equal footing with her betrothed. This element of the song probably helped make it unique in a culture mostly ruled by men.

The woman wanted her groom to declare his love for her physically by kissing her. As she pondered his kisses, she described his love as "more delightful than wine" (v. 2). Wine was frequently associated both

with intimacy and with special celebrations in ancient Hebrew culture. Indeed, wine is referred to eight times by the characters in the Song of Songs.

Linking her thoughts of her groom with the fine fragrance of perfumes, she then remarked that his name was like "perfume poured out" (v. 3). Her reverence for his name indicates that the man was a person of stature, so much so that all the other maidens in the realm loved him.



A vineyard in Israel. The young maiden of the Song of Songs was dark-skinned because her brothers forced her to work in the family's vineyards.

The bride was evidently in a hurry. She wanted her groom to take her away immediately (v. 4). Then she gave the first indication of just who her groom was. After asking to be taken away, she petitioned, "Let the king bring me into his chambers." Most Bible interpreters throughout history have believed that the king she was referring to was Solomon. Hence he was the bridegroom and the focus of all the young woman's attentions.

The second speech in the song comes from young maidens, who were probably friends of the bride. These girls rejoiced and took delight in their friend's bridegroom. Indeed, they considered the couple's love to be more praiseworthy even than wine (v. 4).

After hearing the rejoicing of her attendants, the young bride restated how the king had earned the adoration of the maidens (v. 4; see also v. 3), and then expressed her anxiety. She felt self-conscious about being dark-skinned, and yet at the same time she was confident of her beauty (v. 5). She compared herself to the tents of Kedar and the tent curtains of the king. By doing so, she may have been indicating that she was from Kedar, a Bedouin territory southeast of Damascus, where tents were made of the skin of black goats.

"Do not stare at me," the young woman insisted (see v. 6). She was dark, she explained, because her brothers had made her work in the vineyards, out in the sun. By spending so much time laboring for her brothers, she was forced to neglect her own vineyard (her body).

Turning her thoughts back to her groom, she asked where she could find him as he cared for his sheep (v. 7). She clearly wanted to be near

him. But in joining him, she did not want to give the wrong impression by appearing before him veiled like a prostitute. Love to her was a great deal more than mere sexual gratification. She wanted her husband-to-be to unselfishly love her the way she unselfishly loved him.

Answering the bride's inquiry, the young maidens of Jerusalem gave her directions on how to find her groom by following him to the pastures. They addressed her as the "most beautiful of women," verifying her attractiveness (v. 8). They would repeat this description of her later (see 5:9; 6:1).

b The Beauty of Love (1:9–17)

How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes are doves.
How handsome you are, my beloved!
Oh, how charming!
And our bed is verdant.
—Song of Songs 1:15–16

Now the groom, perhaps King Solomon himself, entered the song. The object of the young woman's love and attention, this man returned expressions of love.

His first words in the song make a strange comparison—or, at least, so it may seem to the modern reader. He compared his bride to a "mare harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh" (v. 9). For a woman living at the time of Solomon, this would have been quite a compliment to her splendor and manner. Horses were considered the most majestic of all animals.

Moving from comparison to description, the lover expressed how the young woman's cheeks and neck were dazzling as she enhanced her beauty with earrings and necklaces (v. 10). Since in Solomon's day horses were sometimes decorated in fancy ways, it may have been the woman's jewelry (similar to horse decorations) that first made him think of comparing her to a mare in harness. Impressed by her beauty,

This relief from the reign of Assyrian king Sargon II shows how horses used by royalty were sometimes adorned. Solomon compared his beloved to a mare drawing a chariot, apparently thinking of her jewelry as similar to horse decorations.

he promised to fashion for her even more jewelry, such as gold earrings studded with silver (v. 11).

With the next verse, the scene shifts to the royal palace. The young woman described how her perfume gave forth its fragrance while the king was at dinner (v. 12). She referred to him as her "lover," a term along with "love" or "beloved" she would use 27 times in this song. Some interpreters deem that in Solomon's day, the expression had a different, less romantic meaning than it does today. For that reason, these terms are sometimes translated "friend," "companion," or "my dear."

The bride's being in her groom's presence brought her the same sensation as the fragrance of myrrh (v. 13) or of henna blossoms (v. 14). The specific blossoms she thought of were from En Gedi on the Dead Sea, a place famous for its perfume business. In short, the girl was just as overwhelmed by her betrothed as he was by her.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I ever felt overwhelmed by someone's love for me? If so, was it a good or a bad experience? Why?*

The young king responded, and the pace of the exchanges between the two quickened. He exclaimed that his darling was beautiful, and then he compared her eyes to doves, which in those days suggested tenderness and purity (v. 15).

The girl echoed his reply by proclaiming that he was handsome and charming, and then she described their wedding bed as "verdant," perhaps suggesting that the bed was arranged as if in a pastoral setting (v. 16). The man, adding to the woman's images from nature, described his chambers as if they were housed in trees, namely, cedars and firs (v. 17). Thus the two lovers seem to create an image almost as ideal as the Garden of Eden with its simplicity, innocence, and refreshing bliss.

Fragrances of Love

The young woman in the Song of Songs wore perfume and compared her lover to perfume. Scents were widely used in the time of Solomon.

"Perfume" (S. of S. 1:12), or *nard* or *spikenard*—a fragrant and expensive ointment from a plant that grew in India. In the ancient Near East it was believed to be a love charm.

"Myrrh" (v. 13)—gum from trees in Arabia, Abyssinia, and India, prized in the ancient world and valuable in international trade. It was used for incense and for perfume on special occasions, such as when Esther and other girls were prepared to meet the king of Persia (Esth. 2:12). It was also used for embalming corpses.

"Henna" (S. of S. 1:14)—a shrub from Israel. The leaves were used to produce an orange-red dye, used in the Near East to color hair, hands, and feet. The blossoms of the shrub are fragrant.

C The Banner of Love (2:1–7)

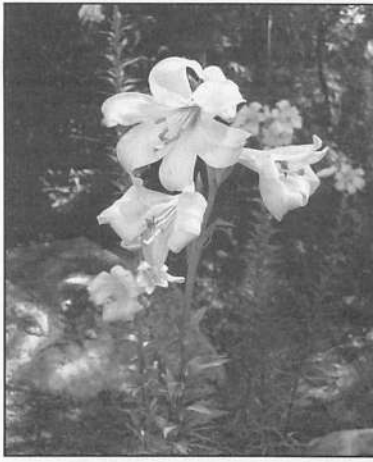
Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest
is my beloved among the young men.
I delight to sit in his shade,
and his fruit is sweet to my taste.
Let him lead me to the banquet hall,
and his banner over me is love.
—Song of Songs 2:3–4

As the maiden and her lover continued their dialogue, she compared herself to two flowers (v. 1). The "rose of Sharon" was a wildflower such as a crocus, narcissus, or daffodil that grew in ancient Israel. Located south of Mount Carmel, Sharon was a low, swampy coastal plain known to be rich in vegetation and flowers. The "lily of the valleys" she mentioned probably was one of a wide range of wildflowers having the appearance of a lily.

Picking up the image she had created, her lover responded by saying that she was more attractive than a lily among thorns, and that she stood out from among all the maidens of the land (v. 2). She must have been an impressive woman in both beauty and personality.

Upon hearing these words, the woman returned her lover's compliment. He, too, stood out from among the young men of the land, impressive in every way. Indeed, he was like a fruit tree surrounded by trees that produced no fruit (v. 3a). She also described how she was overwhelmed with passion for him. She compared this feeling to sitting beneath a shade tree, which yielded sweet fruit (v. 3b). To her, it was as if her groom had taken her to a great feast, where he lovingly watched over her and saw to it that her every need was met. He openly displayed his love for her—as if expressing his love on a military banner for all the people to see (v. 4).

Continuing her comparison of her groom's love to fruit, she asked for raisins and apples because, she said, "I am faint with love" (v. 5). This request was probably a disguised way of asking for her lover's



One of many kinds of lilies flourishing in Israel. The bride in Song of Songs referred to herself as "a lily of the valleys" (S. of S. 2:1).

caresses and embraces, which she described in the next line of the song (v. 6). Before, she had asked for his kisses; now she longed for his embrace.

At this point she apparently realized that she was so overwhelmed by her passion—so filled with love and joy—that it was best to pause so as to not get carried away. Though betrothed to the king, she didn't want to ruin their love by moving it along too quickly. She knew she must wait to be married before having sexual relations with her husband. Thus she decided to restrain her passion while she still could.

This realization then apparently prompted her to give some advice to other maidens. Appealing to nature—namely, gazelles and does—as a witness of her oath, she said, "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires" (v. 7). In other words, love has its own great power, and the women should not stimulate it or encourage it unless it could be fulfilled in the proper context—marriage.

Verse 7 is good advice for teenagers and single adults. God intended for men and women to enjoy a physically intimate relationship, but only within marriage. In a sense, the young woman's advice here answers the question "Why should I wait?"

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I heeding the young woman's advice on self-discipline, love, and intimacy?*

d The Call of Love (2:8–15)

My dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the hiding places on the mountainside,
show me your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.
—Song of Songs 2:14

Beginning with verse 8, there is a scene change in the song, even though the young woman was still speaking. Just before this change, the maiden and her betrothed seem to have been together. Now they were apart.

The girl was at home, and she saw the young man approaching as if he were leaping over the mountains (v. 8). In the song, she described him as a gazelle or young stag, continuing the wild animal imagery she had begun earlier (v. 9a; see v. 7). In the next instant, he arrived and was standing outside the wall of the girl's house, gazing at her through the latticed windows (v. 9b). Since more than one window is mentioned, he may have been moving from window to window, trying to catch a glimpse of her.

The groom, as quoted by the maiden, then made a short speech. He beckoned his fair darling to join him in the forest, where springtime had made everything fresh with new flowers, the song of doves, and the early fruit of fig trees and vines (vv. 10–13).

Discussion on this beautiful passage focuses on whether or not the young man actually visited the maiden at her home. Some believe that in verses 8–13, the young woman was imagining the approach of her groom, or that this scene was a dream (compare 3:1). Whatever the case, it is clear

A fig tree. Next to the olive tree, the fig tree was probably the most important tree in ancient Israel. A symbol of peace and security, it blossoms in March.

that she wanted to be with him.

After being quoted by his bride, the young man responded with a brief appeal to her, who seemed to him like a dove hidden in a cranny in a rock cliff (v. 14). He begged to see her comely face and hear her sweet voice.

In his appeal he called to someone to "catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom" (v. 15). These foxes have been understood in different ways. Some say, for example, that they represent other young men who might have pursued the young woman. Others say the foxes represent the forces of evil or corruption that could have spoiled the purity of the couple's love. Perhaps the man was echoing the woman's advice in verse 7—that intimate physical relations before marriage would spoil their love.

Ask Yourself . . . *What are some of the things that seem to undermine the purity of love between a husband and wife?*

e The Search for Love (2:16–3:5)

I will get up now and go about the city,
through its streets and squares;
I will search for the one my heart loves.
So I looked for him but did not find him.

—Song of Songs 3:2

Reaffirming the mutuality of their love, the maiden made it clear that she and her husband-to-be belonged together. In a way putting herself on the same level as him, she stated that he belonged to her just as she belonged to him. This was why she allowed him to browse "among the lilies" (v. 16)—perhaps a metaphor for kissing or for caressing.

Their appointed time together came to an end, however, and she asked her groom to leave, like a gazelle or stag bounding off across the hills. The Hebrew word that is translated "breaks" (v. 17) actually refers to a gently blowing wind. In the Middle East, evening breezes often dispel the heat of the day. At this time of day, shadows are lengthened, causing them to look as if they are fleeing. Thus dusk was the next prearranged meeting time for this couple. And though their time together had come to an end on this night, she anxiously looked forward to their next get-together.

After their parting, the young woman's portion of the song continues. Apparently, she lay down for sleeping. Thus 3:1–5 is probably an account of her dream.

In this dream, the girl desperately searched for her groom, but could not find him (v. 1). She even arose from bed (in her dream) and went into the city (probably Jerusalem) to look for him. But she failed to find him (v. 2).

The city watchmen discovered her wandering around late at night, and she asked them if they had seen her groom (v. 3). How the watchmen responded is not told, but quite abruptly—as in a dream—she found "the one my heart loves" (v. 4). She tightly clung to him. She refused to let him go until she had brought him to her mother's bedroom, which was where she had been conceived. Perhaps such a request represented that her relationship with the groom was pure and moral. Or this may have been an ancient Israelite marital custom.

As she had done once before, even using the same words, the maiden pulled away from this scene of love and advised the daughters of Jerusalem not to "awaken love until it so desires" (v. 5; see 2:7). As before, her utmost desire was to be pure in love and to consummate it only at the right time and in the proper relationship.

Ask Yourself . . . *How great is my desire to be pure in love?*

Song of Songs 3:6–5:1 in Brief

Sometime after waking from her dream, the young woman described Solomon's wedding procession. The noble entourage included Solomon's carriage and a royal escort of 60 armed soldiers. The daughters of Jerusalem were called out to see Solomon wearing the wedding crown given to him by his mother (3:6–11).

The king responded by praising his bride, using comparisons from both nature and architecture. He called on her to come with him because she had stolen his heart, adding that she was like a garden, a spring, and a fountain (4:1–15). The maiden answered his request by inviting him to share their love, and this scene of the song closes with the groom's expressing his enjoyment of the bride's love (4:16–5:1).

The Life of Love

Song of Songs 5:2–8:14

Song of Songs 5:2–6:3 in Brief

The composer of the Song of Songs was in no way naive. After portraying the wedding procession (3:6–5:1), he showed that, like all brides and grooms, this couple brought personal frailties into their marriage. Whereas the scenes of love in chapters 1–4 before marriage were blissful and joyous, the first scene after the wedding portrays the anxiety of the bride. This uneasiness is described in what is apparently another dream of the young woman's.

In this dream her husband has gone away because she was too lethargic to answer his knocking and open their door. As she had done in her previous dream, the woman sought help from the city watchmen, but this time they beat her and stole her cloak—perhaps images of her feelings of guilt and inadequacy in the marriage (5:2–8).

The young maidens of the city responded to her cry for help, but asked her to describe her husband. She did so in a beautiful portrait of the man she loved (vv. 9–16). In the end, after further inquiries from the maidens, the bride found her husband at their home (6:1–3). Perhaps it was at this point that she awakened and, seeing her husband sleeping next to her, felt reassured.

The Lover Praises His Beloved: Part 1 (6:4–13a)

Sixty queens there may be,
and eighty concubines,
and virgins beyond number;
but my dove, my perfect one, is unique,
the only daughter of her mother,
the favorite of the one who bore her.

—Song of Songs 6:8–9

With his new bride awake and lying beside him in their bed, the king offered another tribute to her. The first part of it repeats some things he had already said (compare 6:4–7 with 4:1–3). He said she was as lovely as the Israelite cities of Tirzah and Jerusalem, and as majestic as troops in battle (6:4). To Solomon, his new

To her new husband, the young woman's teeth were perfect, "like a flock of sheep coming up from the washing" (S. of S. 6:6).

bride resembled mighty cities in that she was breathtakingly spectacular. She resembled a great army with banners flying, in that she was awe inspiring.

Her eyes overwhelmed him, so much so that he asked her to turn away (v. 5a). Her hair shimmered in the same way that a flock of goats might appear to shimmer if seen from a distance, descending in a flowing movement from the hills of Gilead (v. 5b). Likewise, her perfect teeth reminded him of a flock of lambs, each matched with another (v. 6). Furthermore, her temples gleamed behind her veil like the split halves of pomegranates (v. 7).

All in all, no one compared to her, not even 60 queens or 80 concubines or innumerable young women (v. 8). It is certainly possible that Solomon was here comparing his new bride to the other women in his harem. Sadly, he would eventually have as many as 1,000 wives and concubines. Nonetheless, in his eyes she was perfect and unique, just as she was the sole girl and favorite child in her family (v. 9a). Even the young women of the kingdom and the other wives and concubines of Solomon praised her beauty (v. 9b).

And so did her friends, the daughters of Jerusalem. They said she shone like the dawn and was as beautiful as the moon, as radiant as the sun, and as awesome as the stars (v. 10).

Ask Yourself . . . *How diligent am I about lavishing praise on those I love?*

Sometime after the friends added their praise, the king told in the song how he left his house to check on his harvest of nuts, grapes, and pomegranates (v. 11). But then, in his fancy, he visualized himself sitting in a royal chariot among his people (v. 12).

What does this mean? No one knows for sure. Bible scholars agree that verses 11–12 constitute one of the most difficult passages in the Song of Songs to translate. Some suggest that these verses be interpreted as sexual imagery. Others suggest that these verses were spoken not by the husband, but by the wife, who was remembering being carried to the king's palace after being summoned by his guards.

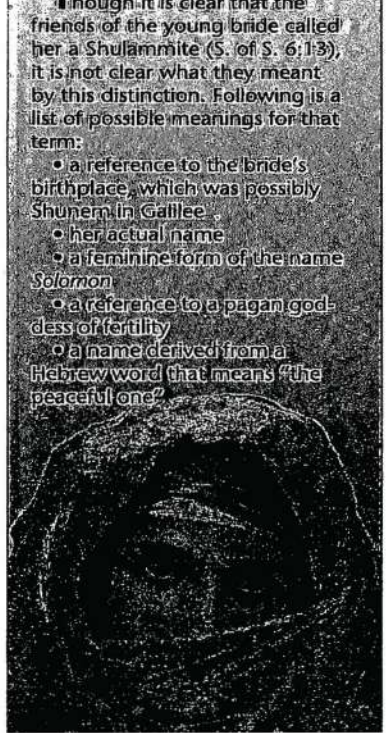
Whatever the case, the friends of

the Shulammite bride called on her to return to their midst so that they might enjoy her beauty once more (v. 13a). This is the only verse in the poem in which the young bride is referred to as a Shulammite.

The Shulammite Woman

Though it is clear that the friends of the young bride called her a Shulammite (S. of S. 6:13), it is not clear what they meant by this distinction. Following is a list of possible meanings for that term:

- a reference to the bride's birthplace, which was possibly Shunem in Galilee
- her actual name
- a feminine form of the name *Solomon*
- a reference to a pagan goddess of fertility
- a name derived from a Hebrew word that means "the peaceful one"



b The Lover Praises His Beloved: Part 2 (6:13b–7:9a)

How beautiful you are and how pleasing,
my love, with your delights!
—Song of Songs 7:6

The husband prefaced this section of the song with a question: "Why would you gaze on the Shulammite as on the dance of Mahanaim?" (6:13b). We're not sure what the dance of Mahanaim was. There was a town in the Transjordanian region by that name, so perhaps it was a dance that took place there. Or, since "Mahanaim" literally means "two armies" or "double camp," this dance may have involved two groups of dancers or may have been performed before two armies. In any case, the sensuous lyrics that follow this question provide answers in abundance for why people would gaze on the woman.

In this poem (7:1–9a), the groom offered his most complete description of his new wife, praising her from foot to head. And this time, in addition to using imagery from nature and architecture, he also used imagery from precious tableware, a bountiful harvest, and exquisite tapestry.

The king's intent was apparently to praise everything about his bride—from her charm and grace to her strength of character and disposition. He said he thought her feet in sandals were lovely, and he said

her thighs were like jewels (v. 1). He exclaimed that her navel was like a round goblet, and her waist like a heap of wheat hedged about with lilies (v. 2).

After repeating his description of her breasts as two gazelle fawns (v. 3; see also 4:5), he went on to praise her neck, eyes, and nose, comparing them to towers and pools (7:4). Next, he praised her hair, saying it crowned her head like Mount Carmel (v. 5a). Comparing her tresses to royal tapestry, he admitted that the beauty of her hair held him captive (v. 5b).

As he praised his wife, the husband could hardly hold back his enthusiasm. He exclaimed, "How beautiful you are and how pleasing, O love, with your delights!" (v. 6). Then he unashamedly poured out his feelings about their most intimate moments of love-making since having been married (vv. 7–9a).

The words the groom used to describe his wife's breath and mouth might also refer to her pleasing way of speaking and holding conversation. If so, his attraction to her was far more than just erotic; he was attracted to her whole personality as well as to her beauty.

Ask Yourself . . . *What can I do to increase the purity of my life?*

The picture below shows a view of the western summit of Mount Carmel. In the Song of Songs, the lover compared his beloved's head to Mount Carmel.

The Beloved Answers Her Lover (7:9b–8:4)

Come, my beloved, let us go to the countryside,
let us spend the night in the villages.
Let us go early to the vineyards
to see if the vines have budded,
if their blossoms have opened,
and if the pomegranates are in bloom—
there I will give you my love.
—Song of Songs 7:11–12

Responding to her husband's praise of her, the young wife offered adoration of her own. In response to his saying that her mouth was like the choicest wine, she suggested that her wine go straight to him as they shared kisses (v. 9b).

The woman then declared in renewed confidence that she and her husband belonged to each other. Specifically, she stressed that his desire was for her (v. 10). The use of the word "desire" here is intriguing because the woman reversed the use of desire mentioned in a negative context in Genesis 3:16. There the desire was not the man for the woman, but the woman for the man.

In Christ we discover a new standard for love and desire and commitment that not only binds us together more strongly, but also gives infinitely more respect to our individual identity and dignity—regardless of whether we are a man or a woman. That is because, as Jesus Himself said, He came to bring us abundant life.

Ask Yourself . . . How has Christ made my life more abundant in the areas of love and marriage?

Obviously, the young bride felt a sense of equality in her love for her husband. Their desire for each other was mutual. In fact, she was forthright enough to suggest they go out together in public. She wanted the two of them to retreat to the countryside—no doubt because she came from the country. She also recommended staying overnight in the villages along the way (S. of S. 7:11). Having grown up in villages and vineyards (see 1:6), she wanted to share with her new husband a place where she felt at home.

In this natural setting, she said, they would be able to celebrate their love surrounded by vines and blossoms and pomegranates (7:12). All of these elements of nature symbolized the fullness and joy of their marriage union.

She looked forward to the fragrance of the mandrake, an herb whose root was long thought to stimulate the passions of love. Indeed, in a country setting, she told her husband, "is every delicacy, both new and old, that I have stored up for you, my lover" (v. 13).

Having decided to go out in public, the bride made a startling wish. She wished her husband was her brother so she could kiss him outside the privacy of their home (8:1). Apparently she was compensating for a custom that allowed a brother

and sister to show affection in public, but not a husband and wife.

Her next thought likely also took into account the contemporary culture. She repeated her earlier wish (see 3:4) to bring her husband to her mother's bedroom, where she would give herself to him in love (8:2). She completed setting the scene in the next line, in which she described herself as lying in his arms (v. 3).

Even with these thoughts of intimacy, she did not forget her relationship with her friends, the daughters of Jerusalem. She paused so that she might repeat for the third time her advice—that the young women should not indulge in love's passion unless the time and place had been confirmed by the vows of marriage (v. 4; see also 2:7; 3:5).

d The Seal of Love (8:5–14)

Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm;
for love is as strong as death,
its jealousy unyielding as the grave.
It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.
—Song of Songs 8:6

The married couple evidently followed the girl's desire to go out into the countryside, because the next lines of the song portray them returning to the city. The young maidens saw them first and announced their arrival (v. 5a). The wife was apparently leaning on her husband, not because she was weak or tired, but because she wanted to be close to him.

This time the bride ignored the outside world and focused her conversation on her lover. She recalled how she roused her lover "under the apple tree" (v. 5b). (In the ancient Near East, sexual union was often expressed in connection with the mention of fruit trees, probably because of the trees' association with fertility.) Instead of going to her mother's home—a desire she had earlier expressed (see 3:4; 8:2)—the couple had gone to the home of the groom's mother.

At this location they vowed their eternal love to each other. The wife asked her husband to "place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm" (v. 6a). In ancient times, an engraved seal was used to signify ownership. Possession of another person's seal indicated that the possessor had as much right to the owner's property as the owner himself. In this context the wife was saying that she wanted to seal her claim on her husband.

In what many consider the high point of the song, the young woman stated that "love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave" (v. 6b). In his commentary on this passage, Dennis F. Kinlaw writes, "Love's demands are all-consuming. External forces cannot quench or drown it. Its value is greater than all the possessions one might ever possess."

Much debate has gone on over the correct translation of the phrase "like a mighty flame" (v. 6c). The *Jerusalem Bible* translates it as "a flame of Yahweh himself," and the NIV adds that an alternate rendition could be "like the very flame of the Lord." The point in stressing these alternate translations is that if they are accurate, then verse 6b becomes the only verse in the Song of Songs in which there is a reference to God.

Examples of stamp-type seals. The young wife of Solomon asked him to "place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm" (S. of S. 8:6).

Certainly both Jewish and Christian interpreters have argued for the divine inspiration of the Song of Songs, but such a reference to the Lord might, in some people's eyes, provide a final seal of its inspiration. Still, scholars argue that even without the reference, this book presents the noblest biblical teaching on human love and sexuality.

The young woman's declaration of love continued by saying that vast floods could not quench true love (v. 7a). Furthermore, if one truly in love were asked to exchange love for material wealth, the offer would be rejected without hesitation (v. 7b). In short, love is not for sale.

Ask Yourself . . . *How has love been more valuable than wealth to me?*

A group of the bride's friends are reintroduced at this point in the song. They came to the bride for advice about a younger sister, who had not yet reached sexual maturity. Specifically, they wanted to know how to handle the situation when the girl was spoken for in marriage (v. 8).

The imagery of the "wall" (v. 9a) probably represents the younger sister's character. Thus the older sisters wanted to build up her character to ensure her purity. The "door" (v. 9b) probably represents the younger sister's strong virtue that protected her from seduction.

In response to her friends' question, the young bride spoke boldly, picking up on the wall image the maidens had introduced. She confided that she herself had been a wall keeping out others in order to remain chaste for her husband. Because she had done so, she had become in his eyes as one who finds favor (v. 10).

In the next line of the song, the young bride seems to have returned to the idea that love cannot be bought. Most interpreters assume that while Solomon's vineyard (v. 11) is literal, the girl's vineyard (v. 12) is metaphorical and refers to herself. If so, she explained that while

her husband—Solomon—was able to profit from his vineyard, she was not for sale at any price. She had, in fact, committed herself to her husband, and he no doubt understood her priceless value.

The bride used this analogy to show the maidens and their younger sister how solidly she had committed herself to her marriage. Discipline and courage and a life of virtue—all of these contributed to a love that was of more value than anything on earth.

The Song of Songs comes to an end with the young bride and her groom once again calling to each other. The husband saw that his wife was in a garden among some friends. Nonetheless, he yearned to hear her voice again (v. 13).

The young wife, in her turn, cried out, "Come away, my lover" (v. 14). Using the same images she had used before, she desired for her husband to hurry to her as swiftly as a gazelle or a young stag might run on hills of spices. Thus the song tapers off with expressions of this couple's love for each other—a love that would give them a life of faithfulness and joy.

Several commentators point out that the bride's last words are somewhat echoed in the Book of Revelation: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Rev. 22:17).

Whatever we think of the parallel made between the lovers of this Song of Songs and Christ and the Church, we can receive the overarching message of God's love in our own lives. In the song, the bride called the husband to lasting love and contentment. In Revelation, the Spirit and the bride called for anyone who is thirsty to come.

We are the thirsty ones, and God calls us to respond to His invitation to love Him with all of our heart, mind, and soul. If we respond by running to Him, He will quench our thirst with everlasting life and rewards.

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