The question at the heart of the Book of Job, as we have seen, is whether or not his piety is genuine. ‘Is it not based on self-interest,’ as the *satan* contends? But as we approach the latter chapters of the book now, we see that Job retains his integrity, even though he wavers, and in the end keeps faith with God.[[1]](#endnote-1)

And even though Job’s three friends arguing that he should repent, for his suffering is caused by hidden sin (i.e. Torah Toting Deuteronomists), Job refuses to reproach himself (27:1-6).

Far be it from me to say that you are right;
    until I die I will not put away my integrity from me.
6 I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go;
    my heart does not reproach me for any of my days. (Job 27:5-6)

Now Job pushes back against his friends and their learned advice.

I will teach you concerning the hand of God;
    that which is with the Almighty I will not conceal.
All of you have seen it yourselves;
    why then have you become altogether vain? (27:11)

But where is real wisdom to be found, if not in the endless talk of these educated men?

Well, you can’t buy it, it can’t be gotten for jewels or gold or chrysolite of Ethiopia (28:19), it isn’t in the depth of the sea (28:14), it isn’t found in the land of the living, mortals can’t find the way to true wisdom (28:13).

 “God understands the way to it,
    and he knows its place.
 For he looks to the ends of the earth,
    and sees everything under the heavens.( Job 28:23-24)

And here is the heart of the matter, not just for today, but for the book of Job, and it anticipates the speech of God, to which we come next week: Job 28:28.

And he [God] said to humankind,
‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;
    and to depart from evil is understanding.’”

Back to this in a moment.

Chapter 28 seems to be a moment of lucid interlude for Job. Sometimes we have clarity in a moment of calm but then are overwhelmed once again by the stress of coping with life. Sounds pretty human I’d say. Think here of Don Quixote, who is utterly crazy for 20 pages and the only one who sees the truth with a heart stopping clarity.

Job falls again into anguish. He laments (all of chapter 30). He defends his conduct systematically (he doesn’t lie v 5, lust v 9, he is just v 13-15, the is charitable vs 16, he opposes oppression v 21, he is rich the right way vvs 24-28, he doesn’t mock v 29-31, he is hospitable vvs 32-35). [[2]](#endnote-2)

Let the Almighty answer me! (Job 31:35)

Chapter 29 is Job’s version of the song Yesterday… all my troubles seemed so far… now here it looks as though they are here to stay, oh I believe in yesterday.

I sat as a chief, and I lived like a king among his troops, like one who comfort mourners. But now they make sport of me.. they mock me in song, I am a by word… everyone avoids me… they treat me like their spitoon. (Job 29:25, 30:1, 9-10).

Let the Almighty answer me! (Job 31:35)

Okay, let’s go back to 28:28.

And he [God] said to humankind,
‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;
    and to depart from evil is understanding.’”

The “fear of the Lord” is everywhere in the OT. Someone noted that over 200 different characters in the OT are said to have experienced it.

The Hebrew יךאת (yir’at) has a pretty broad range.[[3]](#endnote-3)

* Fear, terror, great fear
* Reverence, piety, honour
* Stand in awe of

He [Adam] said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” (Gen 3:10)

Upon sight of the burning bush, …Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Ex 3:6)[[4]](#endnote-4)

These examples seem to be those of the garden-variety (no pun intended) fear and terror sort.

One writer said that over 100 references to “fear” in the OT are of the positive kind, i.e. denoting reverence. So you see the balance.

In the NT we see the nascent church: Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers. (Acts 9:31)

Here the meaning seems to be that of reverence, piety, honour and awe.

But perhaps not completely apart from also a proper fear due to the magnificence of God. Let’s not put too much distance between proper fear and reverence, they are semantic close cousins.

You see, we don’t hear much any more about the fear of God.

I don’t mean the kind of fear that the old-time evangelists used to scare people into heaven. Accept the Lord or else suffer the alternative, hell. As we talk at length about the notion of selfless piety in Job, it puts the use of fear as a motivator for accepting the gospel in its proper light.

What could be a more self-serving piety, the very antithesis of what Job was tested on, than running to God merely to escape punishment. That is not the gospel.

Job worshipped God neither for reward or punishment, but because the nature of God demanded his loyalty. That is the central idea of the book.

‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom…***[[5]](#endnote-5)***

Job fears God.

Therefore I am terrified at his presence;
    when I consider, I am in dread of him.
16 God has made my heart faint;
    the Almighty has terrified me;
17 If only I could vanish in darkness,
    and thick darkness would cover my face! (Job 23:15-17)

So how does fear work? Where is the boundary between terror and awe? They kiss somewhere in the middle. The kiss is not awe absent of terror, or terror absent of awe, but a place where God’s presence creates a true sense of its reality – absent of neither.

 What another author described as encompassing attitudes of awe, reverence and fear to build a “proper and elemental response to the person of God.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

No… we don’t talk much about the fear of the Lord these days.

And how do fear and wisdom relate?

In our first message about the set-up of the story we said that the story is all about the gap:

* the gap between heaven and earth,
* the gap in understanding by Job about what is happening to him as a result of this heavenly test,
* the gap in understanding by Job’s friends about what is happening in Job’s life
* That the whole story is about what we don’t and cannot know about the divine purpose

Theology has a concept called the *mysterium tremendum*. It means the terrible mystery of God’s person. This is the gap we can’t bridge. On the other hand we have the ever-present attraction of our souls to the great God of the universe. There is a repulsion and an attraction happening in this dynamic state, like magnets of opposite pole repulse, then, made right rush together bonded in their essence.

Think of the presence of the Ark of the Lord in the midst of the people. 1 Samuel 6 is a perfect example, a terror to the Philistines, who can’t wait to get rid of it and a joy to the people of Beth-Shemesh when it returns to them on a cart.

It is not only something to be fearfully preserved, the symbol of God’s very presence in the nation, a “devastating divine holiness,” as Eichrodt calls it, but also “joy in the divine power and in the promise of his being near at hand to aid.” [[7]](#endnote-7)

We have fear but we also have fascination and creaturely powerlessness which draws us to the Creator. One person called this experience central to the experience of faith but also evidence of saving faith.

If you don’t fear God you don’t know who He is. If your soul is drawn to Him like a magnet saving faith is at work in you.

Once you know this God you have struck out upon the path of true knowing. My knowledge can’t get me to God any more that the knowledge of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar could encompass the knowledge of God.

Job tells us in chapter 28 how fear and wisdom relate.

***“But where shall wisdom be found?
    And where is the place of understanding?
Mortals do not know the way to it
    and it is not found in the land of the living.*** (vvs 12-13)

Acknowledging this is foundational to three things.

* The sense of sacred that has drifted away from us. Are we too friendly with God?
* Humility – which is, in itself a “proper and elemental response to the person of God.”
* This knowledge is understanding that causes us depart from evil

The counterpoint to our gap of understanding is God’s command of all knowledge.

“God understands the way to it,
    and he knows its place.
24 For he looks to the ends of the earth,
    and sees everything under the heavens. (vvs 23-24)

Until you understand both of these things, our humble ignorance and God’s omniscience you can’t know wisdom. [[8]](#endnote-8)

This is where **God says:**

‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom…***[[9]](#endnote-9)***

Think of Peter on his knees before Jesus when their boats were filled to sinking with fish after a futile night:

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”… Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”

And yet When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. (Luke 5:8, 11).

Thus we have the story of Job, who was blameless and upright, one who feard God and turned away from evil. (Job 1:1)

There was fear, there was attraction, there was a dynamic, life-changing, world-changing faith.

Amen

Questions for discussion:

* How does the fear of the Lord, both as a *mysterium tremendum*, "terrible mystery" and as "awe and reverence," shape our faith?
* What and how should we teach about the fear of the Lord in this day and age?
* Is Job's fear of the Lord evidence of the selfless piety he exemplifies?
* Are we too friendly with God? What imperative does the sense of sacred call us to?

Benediction (Job 28:23-24):

And now, may the God who understands the way to wisdom, who knows its place, The God who looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens, cast his loving gaze on upon you, keep you and bless today and in the week to come. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen

1. Some scholars hold that Job’s assertion that God is wise was an insertion in the narrative by a nervous redactor who thought the book too unremittingly doubtful about God’s justice after chapter 1-27. Others say that Job just had ups and downs, like all of us because he toggles back to despair in 29-31. “Simply put, sufferers have up-and-down moments. While they can experience momentary calm in the midst of their emotional storm, often the pain overwhelms them, and they are suddenly confused and upset again” (*Job*, Longman, p. 327). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. What about Elihu? What role does he play in all of this? That isn’t clear. I think you could have left him out and the book would have ended more cogently. Go straight from Job’s monologue in 28-31, with its ups and down, to God’s speech beginning in 38.Maybe it is a mirror for our own arrogance. Elihu is described by commentators variously as hot-headed, bombastic, prolix, impatient, arrogant. “Elihu, it is I!” I’m not sure what his purpose is in the narrative. The Lord takes, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar to task but ignore Elihu completely. Maybe that is all we need to know. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the OT,* Brown, Driver Briggs, pp. 431-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See also Sarah in Gen 18:15; Lot in Gen 19:30 and many others. In the NT see Phil 2:12. Luke 12:5; 2 Cor 5:11; 1 Pet 1:17, 2:17; Rev 14:7, 15:4, 19:5. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. We think also of the familiar refrain of Psalm 111:10: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
    all those who practice it have a good understanding [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 277. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. “Thus, the ark as the locus of God’s presence is not only an object of fear in the face of the devastating divine holiness, but also of joy in the divine power and in the promise of his being near at hand to aid.” (Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 270)

Questions for Cal

	* Job’s friends wait seven days, and then it is Job who breaks the silence. What does this tell us about friendship and the giving of advice? [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Longman, “The point of the passage [28:28] is that humans cannot find wisdom apart from God. They cannot find it on their own but find it only by fearing God. This message is appropriate for the book as a whole, since Job, these three friends, and eventually Elihu grasp for wisdom with their own abilities until the very end, when Job conclusively embraces the fear of the Lord by submitting to God in repentance (42:1-6).” [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. We think also of the familiar refrain of Psalm 111:10: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
    all those who practice it have a good understanding [↑](#endnote-ref-9)