

What is Important to Do?
Job 28, Micah 6

Turn to Job 28 please. Before God, what is the most important thing to do? We will get many things done in life, and that's as it should be. We did many things this last week. But is there a simple priority? Is there a priority that leaves no one out? Something that's always possible?

There is, and Job 28 gives it to us. Job 28 deliberately puts it in perspective, and makes it real simple. Job 28 takes us to this finale by talking about wisdom. We'll also look at three verses in Micah 6, Micah 6:6–8. Micah 6 takes us to the same important thing by a different path.

I am bringing Micah 6 into this sermon because it gives us the same priority without talking about wisdom at all. I'm also bringing Micah 6 into this sermon because these are important lines, and I don't think I've spoken to you of them until now. But I will today.

1 The Question of Job 28: Where can Wisdom be Found? Vv12, 20

V12 *But where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell?*

V20 *Where then does wisdom come from? Where does understanding dwell?*

Poor Job. His life is a disaster. His friends are giving him their wisdom to explain his disastrous life, and he knows they are wrong. Until his troubles, he probably would have agreed with them, but now he knows that their wisdom is useless. But what *does* explain his suffering? He has no idea. The wisdom he's asking about is: how does God order the natural world? What explains the things that happen? Where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell? How does God order the natural world, including what happens to us? How does he accomplish his purposes and plans?

2 What Humans *Can* Find – Job 28:1–11

There is a mine for silver and a place where gold is refined.

Iron is taken from the earth, and copper is smelted from ore.

Mortals put an end to the darkness; they search out the farthest recesses

for ore in the blackest darkness. Far from human dwellings they cut a shaft,

in places untouched by human feet; far from other people they dangle and sway.

The earth, from which food comes, is transformed below as by fire;

lapis lazuli comes from its rocks, and its dust contains nuggets of gold.

No bird of prey knows that hidden path, no falcon's eye has seen it.

Proud beasts do not set foot on it, and no lion prowls there.

People assault the flinty rock with their hands and lay bare the roots of the mountains.

They tunnel through the rock; their eyes see all its treasures.

They search the sources of the rivers and bring hidden things to light.

Humans are incredibly adept at going after what they want. People are determined, energetic, creative, innovative, skillful. If people want to find something or get something done, we make it work. This paragraph is about ancient mining, and it is impressive. I had no idea these things were going on hundreds of years before Christ, but they were. People know how to find silver and gold and all kinds of precious stones. Miners go to great lengths, and find what they want.

3 What Humans Cannot Find and Cannot Afford – Job 28:12–22

*But where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell?
No mortal comprehends its worth; it cannot be found in the land of the living.
The deep says, “It is not in me”; the sea says, “It is not with me.”
It cannot be bought with the finest gold, nor can its price be weighed out in silver.
It cannot be bought with the gold of Ophir, with precious onyx or lapis lazuli.
Neither gold nor crystal can compare with it, nor can it be had for jewels of gold.
Coral and jasper are not worthy of mention; the price of wisdom is beyond rubies.
The topaz of Cush cannot compare with it; it cannot be bought with pure gold.
Where then does wisdom come from? Where does understanding dwell?
It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing, concealed even from the birds in the sky.
Destruction and Death say, “Only a rumor of it has reached our ears.”*

Here’s what Job 28 means by “wisdom.” How does God order and arrange the world we live in? By means of wisdom. What explains why things work as they do, what explains what happens, including what happens to us? Wisdom means knowing how God orders and arranges creation.

Humans have no idea where to find this. In fact it is not here. This wisdom cannot be found in the land of the living. It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing, and death and destruction cannot tell us either. The wisdom of creation does not exist within creation.

Furthermore, even if it could be bought, we could not afford it. It is far more valuable than anything humans could use to pay for it. We have nothing of equal value to trade for it. It is not for sale, but even if it was, all the precious things we find in mines would not pay for wisdom.

Job 28 should make us skeptical about any claims to unlock the secrets of the universe, or to explain why the world is as it is. We don’t know why it is as it is. Science tells us how many things work, but it cannot tell us why it is like that. How does God order and arrange the natural world, including our lives? That’s wisdom that we do not have.

4 What Only God Can Find – Job 28:23–27

God understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells, for he views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When he established the force of the wind and measured out the waters, when he made a decree for the rain and a path for the thunderstorm, then he looked at wisdom and appraised it; he confirmed it and tested it.

Wind, water, rain, thunderstorms. Land and water are repeated themes when Bible speaks about God's wisdom. Probably not what we expected.

Proverbs 8:27–31 Wisdom speaks in these verses. *I, wisdom, was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was constantly at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind.*

God's wisdom is bound up in ordering the natural world, the heavens and the fountains of the deep, the sea and the land. In our Job 28 paragraph, it says God established the force of the wind, he measured the waters, he decreed rain and made a path for thunderstorms.

What explains the force of the wind and the path of the thunderstorms? Science can tell us how it happens, but all it can do is report what happens. How does God decide the force of the wind or the path of the thunderstorm? It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing.

Climate change has always been happening, people. Don't panic. The same parts of the world that experienced ice age at one time, at other times experienced tropical conditions, and it had nothing to do with human activity. Humans may well be a part of what explains current climate change. But the God of the Bible, in his wisdom, has always decreed the weather. Always.

5 Wisdom for Humans – Job 28:28

And God said to the human race, "The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding."

Job 28 speaks of two different kinds of wisdom. There's wisdom that belongs only to God, and until v27 we've been talking about that wisdom. In v28 there is a wisdom that God speaks to humans. For us, *the fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.*

All the ways humans are intelligent and resourceful and effective is nothing to this. None of our searching could find this. We know this only because God told us. Job 28 tells us that this is really the only thing worth knowing, to fear the Lord and to forsake evil. I think we all already knew we were to fear the Lord and forsake evil, but maybe we didn't know how central it was. We didn't know it was the most important thing in the world to know. But it is.

When you think about "the fear of the Lord," don't focus on the word "fear." Instead, read the lines in the Bible that come before the fear of the Lord, and after. In the Bible, the fear of the Lord is overwhelmingly a way of living, not a way of feeling. In Job 28:28, the Bible pairs the fear of the Lord with forsaking evil. The emphasis is on how we live.

The fear of the Lord means I say to myself, “This God is a God I need to honour in my actions. This is a God I cannot afford to ignore in my life. This is a God I need to serve and it needs to show.” The fear of the Lord is not about fear. It’s a respect for God that shapes how I live.

In Job 1–2, God twice described Job himself as a man who feared God and shunned evil (1:8; 2:3). Job knows this is true of him. He has always intended to live this way, and has done so. He knows this is the right way to live.

And by this point in his life, after his troubles and listening to his friends give him what they called wisdom, Job realizes that this is really the only important thing he knows. Job does not know why such things have happened to him; he has no idea how God is ordering the natural world that has been so hard on him. Job submits to the only thing he knows for sure. God said to the human race, “The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.”

6 Detour: What is Important to Do? What Does the Lord Require of Us? Micah 6:6–8

Now we’ll look at 3 verses in Micah 6 for a few minutes. Micah 6 is not about wisdom, but it ends almost exactly where Job 28 ends. In the Hebrew Bible, what we call the twelve minor prophets are just one book, the Book of the Twelve. Their prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve. And Micah 6 is almost exactly in the center of the Book of the Twelve. It is the nugget in the middle. We’re asking the same question we began with: before God, what is important to do? Let’s read.

6:6a With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Micah has been preaching against the sins of the Jews. It’s mostly social, that is, they treated fellow Jews terribly. Particularly the rulers and leaders, the judges and the rich gouged the poor. One of them is having this conversation with Micah. “What does God want? What shall I bring him?”

6:6b Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? This is the kind of thing Israelites were taught to do in Leviticus. The burnt offering was the most basic offering. Is that how I should come to God? Go to a priest and bring a sacrifice?

6:7a Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? This gift basically asks, “Could I buy God’s acceptance? If my gift was big enough, would he receive me?” These are not the words of a desperate person. In verse 8 Micah begins, “He has shown you what is good.” The question, “will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams?” is more pagan than desperate. If these Jews have been paying any attention at all, they know that God’s acceptance cannot be bought.

6:7b Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? Now we pick up the real problem: sin. How shall sinners come to God? Burnt offerings already hinted at this. Micah wrote because of the sins of Judah. Three times already in Micah, he talked about their transgressions and their sins (1:5, 13; 3:8).

The Jews at different times did actually do just this, they sacrificed their children to the god Molech. For God, that was the worst idolatry of all. A Jew in Jerusalem asks Micah this? *Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?* It is thoroughly pagan thinking. It does propose an indescribably costly gift.

6:8 *He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.* Micah was not impressed with the questions, and neither was God. Micah says, “God has already told you what he wants.” The prophets never tried to get rid of the sacrifices. But they were always clear that daily behavior comes first. Without daily godliness, sacrifices and gifts and offerings were useless.

And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

A short list of three: first, act justly. Always be fair. No one gets less than what’s due them. Everyone gets what they have a right to. Big problem in Micah. Much injustice in Jerusalem.

Second, love to show mercy. Showing mercy means being generous with needy people, and being kind to difficult people. But it does not just say to show mercy. It says to *love* to show mercy. Love being generous with needy covenant people and kind to difficult covenant people.

The Old Testament prophets all preached against one of two things. One, Israel’s idolatry, they did not love the Lord their God with all their might. And two, the terrible way Israelites treated each other; they did not love their Israelite neighbour as themselves. And Micah is mostly the second, the vicious way Jews treated each other. Act justly and love to show mercy.

Third, walk humbly with your God. This is much the same as “the fear of the Lord” in Job 28:28. Act justly, love to show mercy, and walk humbly with God. With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow down before the exalted God? He has already told you. Act justly, love to show mercy, and walk humbly with God.

To “fear the Lord” and to “walk humbly with your God” are pretty much interchangeable. And to shun evil means to act justly and to love mercy.

Job 28 gets to Job’s powerful little summary by a different path than how Micah 6 gets to Micah’s powerful little summary. I want you to see how much the same the summaries are, and to see different starting points take us to the same center.

And God said to the human race, “The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.” He has shown you what is good. What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and love to show mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. We’re now at the two great commands of Jesus: love God with all your might, and love your neighbour as yourself.

7 What About Our Lives?

The story of the man Job, and the teaching of Job 28, affect all of our lives profoundly. We have all tasted some of Job's prosperity and blessing, and we have all tasted some of his troubles and sufferings. We all search for some kind of cause and effect explanation that will help us make sense of these things. Troubles come on us that we never saw coming, and some of them are long and severe. What explains this? What explains the great variety of experience from one person to another even among us in this small church?

Job's friends rejected the world's wisdom, and gave Job the established wisdom of God's people. They were sure they knew why God arranged Job's life as he did. Job knew that they were wrong, but he did not have anything better to offer.

And now we are ready for Job 28. Humans are creative and adept and energetic at finding what they want, but they cannot find this wisdom. Humans cannot find the knowledge and understanding of why God orders and arranges things in Creation as he does. That wisdom is simply unavailable on earth. It's not in the land of the living, and Death does not have it either. God alone know the way to that wisdom. The Bible gives us much, but not that.

But at the end of Job 28, God speaks to the human race, and gives us the high point, the pinnacle, of human wisdom. For all the human ability to find what we want, we would never have found this. In Job as in Micah, we have this only because God told us. For the human race, the fear of the Lord is wisdom, and forsaking evil is understanding. Not knowing that, doing that. If I'm not doing it than I don't know it.

What you must grasp and not miss is that no knowledge or understanding on earth is as important as this. We live in an age of information, bombarded with information. We need Job 28 and Micah 6 to give us perspective on this. To show respect for Yahweh in how we live our ordinary daily lives, and to forsake evil, that is wisdom. Let's act justly, let's love to show mercy, let's walk humbly with our God.

If we will embrace this and live this, nobody on earth knows anything as important as what we know. We don't know how or why God orders the world as he does. But we do know the most important thing for humans to know. Amen.

PRAYER: God, thank you that you've been clear about what we need to know, and thank you that sometimes you make it so simple. It sure helps. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.