

Lectionary Readings: Job 28: 1-28 or
Sirach/Ecclesiasticus 42: 15-25
Psalm 88: 1-9 (10-18)
Hebrews 11: 17-31
Luke 12: 13-21

Job, chapters 22-26 contain the third cycle of speeches from Eliphaz and from Bildad together with Job's reply to each of them. Zophar does not feature in this third cycle. Chapter 27 contains Job's Closing Discourse:

Job's final word to his friends

27 And Job continued his discourse:

² 'As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, the Almighty, who has made my life bitter,

³ as long as I have life within me, the breath of God in my nostrils, ⁴ my lips will not say anything wicked, and my tongue will not utter lies.

⁵ I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity.

⁶ I will maintain my innocence and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live.

⁷ 'May my enemy be like the wicked, my adversary like the unjust!

⁸ For what hope have the godless when they are cut off, when God takes away their life?

⁹ Does God listen to their cry when distress comes upon them?

¹⁰ Will they find delight in the Almighty? Will they call on God at all times?

¹¹ 'I will teach you about the power of God; the ways of the Almighty I will not conceal.

¹² You have all seen this yourselves. Why then this meaningless talk?

¹³ 'Here is the fate God allots to the wicked, the heritage a ruthless man receives from the Almighty:

¹⁴ However many his children, their fate is the sword; his offspring will never have enough to eat.

¹⁵ The plague will bury those who survive him, and their widows will not weep for them.

¹⁶ Though he heaps up silver like dust and clothes like piles of clay,

¹⁷ what he lays up the righteous will wear, and the innocent will divide his silver.

¹⁸ The house he builds is like a moth's cocoon, like a hut made by a watchman.

¹⁹ He lies down wealthy, but will do so no more; when he opens his eyes, all is gone.

²⁰ Terrors overtake him like a flood; a tempest snatches him away in the night.

²¹ The east wind carries him off, and he is gone; it sweeps him out of his place.

²² It hurls itself against him without mercy as he flees headlong from its power.

²³ It claps its hands in derision and hisses him out of his place.'

The NIV Study Bible has an introduction to Job 27: 1-23:

The dialogue / dispute section of the book begins with Job's opening lament (chapter 3), continues with the three cycles of speeches (chapters 4-14; 15-21; 22-26) and concludes with Job's closing discourse (chapter 27), in which he asserts his own innocence (vv. 2-6) and eloquently describes the ultimate fate of the wicked (vv. 13-23).

Chapter 28, today's reading, is described as "An Interlude on Wisdom". There is a "refrain" idea which occurs twice – verses 12 and 20 – "*But where then does wisdom come from? (v.12); Where does wisdom come from (v.20) both verses concluding Where does understanding dwell?*"

Verses 1-11 concern human endeavour – the efforts (and ability) to obtain precious natural resources; silver, copper, iron, lapis lazuli – from the earth. The NIV Bible Commentary:

Verses 3-11 illustrate ancient technological ability in mining. Searching in the blackest darkness required light. This could be accomplished by cutting a shaft and letting in sunlight or by torches. The ability to cut shafts through rock is seen in the elaborate "waterworks" in cities like Jerusalem and Megiddo, long before the tunnel of Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:20), whose Siloam Inscription tells of the rigours of boring through hard limestone. Copper was mined in Edom and the Sinai Peninsula. While there was no gold in Palestine, Egypt controlled rich mines in Nubia. As for iron, it was not widely used in Palestine till shortly before 1200 B.C., but there is evidence of working terrestrial iron (as opposed to meteorite iron) back to about 6000 B.C. The OT reflects Israel's lack of technical knowledge in smelting and smithing iron before the time of David. The Philistine monopoly is mentioned in 1 Samuel 13:19-21. Iron mining was developed on the plateau east of the Jordan Valley, and clay in the floor of the valley was used in making large bronze castings (*which would also require the mining and smelting of tin ore*) for Solomon's temple (1 Kings 7:46).

After the first example of the "refrain" the second stanza of this "Interlude on Wisdom" dwells on the value of wisdom and its scarcity compared with even the greatest treasure on earth – a direct comparison is made with those items mined in the first stanza (vv.13-19). The NIV Bible Commentary says of the third and final stanza:

This stanza (vv.21-28) finally addresses the question asked in the refrain. Wisdom has a source, but it is so elusive that only God knows the way to it. We can find it only when we fear God and honour him as God (v.28).

The wisdom theme continues into the alternative reading from Sirach/Ecclesiasticus 42. In a passage headed “The wonders of creation” we read in verse 21: (NEB)

²¹He has set in order the masterpieces of his wisdom, he who is from eternity to eternity; nothing can be added, nothing taken away, and he needs no one to give him advice.

The section of chapter 42 that comprises our reading and the whole of the next chapter are described in the Oxford Bible Commentary to the Apocrypha, as a “Hymn to the Creator”:

This section of Sirach concludes with a long hymn to the creator; 42:15-20 praises the omniscience of God. 42:21-43:26 lists the works of creation. 43:27-33 concludes the hymn with a call to praise. The praise of nature in chapter 43 recalls Job 28 and 38-41, but also Psalms 104 and 148

The NRSV translation of this “whole hymn” (Sirach 42:15-43:33) is given below:

- 15** I will now call to mind the works of the Lord, and will declare what I have seen. By the word of the Lord his works are made; and all his creatures do his will.
- 16** The sun looks down on everything with its light, and the work of the Lord is full of his glory.
- 17** The Lord has not empowered even his holy ones to recount all his marvellous works, which the Lord the Almighty has established so that the universe may stand firm in his glory.
- 18** He searches out the abyss and the human heart; he understands their innermost secrets.
For the Most High knows all that may be known; he sees from of old the things that are to come.
- 19** He discloses what has been and what is to be, and he reveals the traces of hidden things.
- 20** No thought escapes him, and nothing is hidden from him.
- 21** He has set in order the splendours of his wisdom; he is from all eternity one and the same.
Nothing can be added or taken away, and he needs no one to be his counsellor.
- 22** How desirable are all his works, and how sparkling they are to see!
- 23** All these things live and remain forever; each creature is preserved to meet a particular need.
- 24** All things come in pairs, one opposite the other, and he has made nothing incomplete.
- 25** Each supplements the virtues of the other. Who could ever tire of seeing his glory?
- 1** The pride of the higher realms is the clear vault of the sky, as glorious to behold as the sight of the heavens.
- 2** The sun, when it appears, proclaims as it rises what a marvellous instrument it is, the work of the Most High.
- 3** At noon it parches the land, and who can withstand its burning heat?
- 4** A man tending a furnace works in burning heat, but three times as hot is the sun scorching the mountains; it breathes out fiery vapours, and its bright rays blind the eyes.
- 5** Great is the Lord who made it; at his orders it hurries on its course.
- 6** It is the moon that marks the changing seasons, governing the times, their everlasting sign.
- 7** From the moon comes the sign for festal days, a light that wanes when it completes its course.
- 8** The new moon, as its name suggests, renews itself; how marvellous it is in this change,
a beacon to the hosts on high, shining in the vault of the heavens!
- 9** The glory of the stars is the beauty of heaven, a glittering array in the heights of the Lord.
- 10** On the orders of the Holy One they stand in their appointed places; they never relax in their watches.
- 11** Look at the rainbow, and praise him who made it; it is exceedingly beautiful in its brightness.
- 12** It encircles the sky with its glorious arc; the hands of the Most High have stretched it out.
- 13** By his command he sends the driving snow and speeds the lightnings of his judgment.
- 14** Therefore the storehouses are opened, and the clouds fly out like birds.
- 15** In his majesty he gives the clouds their strength, and the hailstones are broken in pieces.
- 17** The voice of his thunder rebukes the earth; **(16)** when he appears, the mountains shake.
At his will the south wind blows; so do the storm from the north and the whirlwind.
He scatters the snow like birds flying down, and its descent is like locusts alighting.
- 18** The eye is dazzled by the beauty of its whiteness, and the mind is amazed as it falls.
- 19** He pours frost over the earth like salt, and icicles form like pointed thorns.
- 20** The cold north wind blows, and ice freezes on the water; it settles on every pool of water, and the water puts it on like a breastplate.
- 21** He consumes the mountains and burns up the wilderness, and withers the tender grass like fire.
- 22** A mist quickly heals all things; the falling dew gives refreshment from the heat.
- 23** By his plan he stilled the deep and planted islands in it.
- 24** Those who sail the sea tell of its dangers, and we marvel at what we hear.
- 25** In it are strange and marvellous creatures, all kinds of living things, and huge sea-monsters.
- 26** Because of him each of his messengers succeeds, and by his word all things hold together.
- 27** We could say more but could never say enough; let the final word be: "He is the all."
- 28** Where can we find the strength to praise him?
For he is greater than all his works.
- 29** Awesome is the Lord and very great, and marvellous is his power.
- 30** Glorify the Lord and exalt him as much as you can, for he surpasses even that.
When you exalt him, summon all your strength, and do not grow weary, for you cannot praise him enough.
- 31** Who has seen him and can describe him? Or who can extol him as he is?
- 32** Many things greater than these lie hidden, for I have seen but few of his works.
- 33** For the Lord has made all things, and to the godly he has given wisdom.

Psalm 88 carries the heading “**A song. A psalm of the Sons of Korah. For the director of music. According to *mahalath leannoth*. A *maskil* of Heman the Ezrahite**”.

We have already noted that “*maskil*” was probably a literary or musical term. A footnote to the NIV text tells us that “*mahalath leannoth*” is possibly a tune – “The Suffering of Affliction”.

The “*Sons of Korah*” refers to the Levitical choir made up of the descendants of Korah; appointed by David to serve in the temple liturgy. The Korahites represented the Levitical family of Kohath son of Levi.

Their leader in the days of David was the Heman mentioned in our heading.

The introduction to the psalm in the NIV Study Bible tells us:

A cry out of the depths, the prayer of one on the edge of death, whose whole life has been lived, as it were, in the near vicinity of the grave. So troubled have been his years that he seems to have known only the back of God’s hand (God’s “wrath”, v.7), and even those nearest him have withdrawn as from one with an infectious skin disease. (see v.8).

There is no hopeful expectation (as in most prayers of the Psalter) burst from these lips; the last words (v.18) speak of darkness as “my closest friend”. And yet the prayer begins, “*O Lord, the God who saves me*”. The psalm recalls the fact that although sometimes godly persons live lives of unremitting trouble, they can still grasp the hope that God is Saviour.

As we read this psalm it is impossible not to be reminded of the situation in which Job finds himself – the suffering; the desertion of family and friends etc.

The NIV Bible Commentary describes Psalm 88 as “**A Prayer in the Darkness of Despair**”:

This is an *individual lament* psalm in which the psalmist knows nothing but sorrow. However, even in the darkness of his grief, he turns to the Lord for deliverance.

As usual, this Commentary breaks the psalm into sections:

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| I. | Prayer for Help | (vv.1-2) |
| II. | The Experience of Dying in Life | (vv.3-5) |
| III. | It is the Lord’ Doing | (vv.6-9a) |
| IV. | Prayer for Help | (vv.9b-12) |

The ‘set’ reading given by the Lectionary compilers is verses 1-9, with the option of adding verses 10-18. It is noted that the commentators see a ‘split’ verse 9 with the first half completing one section, the second half commencing the next.

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| V. | It is the Lord’s Doing | (vv. 13-14) |
| VI. | The Experience of Dying in Life | (vv. 15-18) |

We note that section II and the final section, VI, are given identical titles to those of sections III and V.

A footnote to the NIV translation points out that there is a Hebrew word (*Selah*) found at the end of verse 7 and at the end of verse 10. We may be familiar with this word from our days of reading from the “Authorised” Version.

It is retained in the “New King James” translation (NKJV):

⁷Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and You have afflicted *me* with all Your waves. **Selah**

⁸You have put away my acquaintances far from me; you have made me an abomination to them;

I am shut up, and I cannot get out;

⁹My eye wastes away because of affliction.

LORD, I have called daily upon You; I have stretched out my hands to You.

¹⁰Will You work wonders for the dead? Shall the dead arise *and* praise You? **Selah**

In the Bible, *Selah* is found in 39 psalms and as it is often repeated, as above, it occurs 71 times. The meaning of this Hebrew word is uncertain. It has been suggested that it may indicate a break in the singing of the psalm, perhaps for quiet contemplation – the examples from Psalm 88 above would certainly be very suitable points to stop singing and contemplate the text.

Another commonly held suggestion is that it indicates a blessing and the translated word is “forever”.

A third suggestion, closely linked to “forever” is that it means “lift up or exalt”.

The Hebrews passage once again demonstrates the background of both its author and its intended readership as it looks back over generations of Jewish history. Chapter 11, in the NIV, carries the title “**By Faith**” or “**Faith in Action**” depending on the version being read. Our reading commences at verse 17 but the preceding sixteen verses first define faith then describe earlier examples of faithful people in that history:

¹Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

²This is what the ancients were commended for.

³By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

⁴By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

⁵By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: 'He could not be found, because God had taken him away.'^[a] For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.

⁶And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

⁷By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family.

By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.

⁸By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

¹¹And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she^[b] considered him faithful who had made the promise.

¹²And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

¹³All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.

¹⁴People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.

¹⁵If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.

¹⁶Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one.

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Footnotes

a. [Hebrews 11:5](#) Gen. 5:24

b. [Hebrews 11:11](#) Or *By faith Abraham, even though he was too old to have children – and Sarah herself was not able to conceive – was enabled to become a father because he*

It is interesting to read how Abraham's faith is emphasised – we remember those times when he “doubted” God or, at least, when he wanted to hurry along the promises that have been made to him. He had been promised offspring but both he and Sarah were getting older and older – she was well past the normal age to bear children, so they hatched a plan for Abraham to father a child with Sarah's servant Hagar. We remember the tension that develops after the birth of Ishmael to Hagar and later of Isaac to Sarah.

Charles Wesley, in one of his hymns, writes of the “power of cancelled sin”. Sin – following our own ways – even if forgiven and cancelled leaves a scar. For many it will be a scar that can be forgotten but for others it leaves more than a mark – there is “power” in that scar, it cannot be forgotten.

The existence of Ishmael is such a “scar” – he was not part of God's plan; he was not part of the promise repeated to Abraham time and time again but because he was a son of Abraham the Lord promised to make, from him, another great nation.

In Old Testament times we read of constant conflict between the Israelites and the Ishmaelites. It is possible that some of the Middle East tensions of today are still related to this historical division.

Returning to the set reading we realise that Abraham must have “learnt his lesson”! – having waited an interminable time for the promised son through Sarah he does not hesitate when God tested him, requesting the sacrifice of this ‘heir’ to the future. It would often appear that the deeper faith is held the more stringent is the testing that is applied to it.

From Abraham, the author of Hebrews goes through a catalogue of God's faithful people – Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses' parents, Moses himself, the Israelite people and the prostitute Rahab in Jericho.

The passage on Faith does not finish here. Chapter 11 continues and concludes:

³²And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

³⁵Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection.

³⁶Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.

³⁷They were put to death by stoning;^[a] they were sawn in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated – ³⁸the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

³⁹These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, ⁴⁰since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Footnotes

a. [Hebrews 11:37](#) Some early manuscripts *stoning; they were put to the test;*

They waited, and often suffered, in expectation of a kingdom to come. In the same way, we today, look forward to what God has planned for us in Jesus. We remember particularly fellow Christians who are persecuted in repressive states – rejoicing in their courage and fortitude and praying that they may be ‘delivered from evil’.

How do we interpret, in the lives we live, the parable Jesus tells in Luke 12?

¹⁶ And he told them this parable: 'The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest.

¹⁷ He thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops."

¹⁸ Then he said, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain.

¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

²⁰ **'But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"**

²¹ **'This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God.'**

What is, and what should be, our attitude to material well-being? How do we react to appeals from various relief agencies – how many do we, can we, support at any one time?

We are reminded again of our Church's two year project – looking for justice – headlined "Walking with Micah".

We conclude with words of Jesus: Luke 12:15 - first from the NIV translation and second from the Amplified Bible:

¹⁵ **Then he said to them, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.'**

¹⁵**And He said to them, Guard yourselves and keep free from all covetousness (the immoderate desire for wealth, the greedy longing to have more); for a man's life does not consist in *and* is not derived from possessing overflowing abundance or that which is over and above his needs.**

We are reminded of that very "Christian" statement adopted by, of all organisations, the Communist Party:

"To each according to their needs; from each according to their ability".

This, in its turn, reminds us of the second part of the "Great Commandment" to

"Love our neighbours as ourselves".

A glorious company we sing,
The Master and His men:
He sent them forth to tell His love
By voice and hand and pen;
Then with His Spirit's mighty flame
He made their hearts to glow,
And bade them on a troubled world
His grace and power bestow.

A faithful company we sing,
The steadfast martyr band;
Against the rage of ruler proud
They boldly made their stand;
And still when men defy Christ's name,
The cross is raised on high,
And for His sake His hosts go forth
To battle and to die.

A company of love we sing,
Whom Jesus called to save
All sick and blind and hungry folk,
The outcast and the slave;
And now when life of man or child
Is hurt by sin and pain,
He calls for eager, willing hands
To share His love again.

O we would join this company
Of Jesus and His friends;
This church which now in every land
The reign of Christ extends:
And may that Spirit which of old
His servants did inspire
With love and joy and faith and power
Se all our hearts afire.

Albert F. Bayly

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
Let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace
To let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,
And companions on the road;
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
In the night time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
Speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;
When you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow
Till we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven
We shall find such harmony,
Born of all we've known together
Of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
Let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace
To let you be my servant too.

Richard A. M. Gillard