

## Under The Fig Tree



### WEEK 22

We have a small sample of Solomon's writing. God was faithful to His promise and established the Kingdom of Israel to be prosperous and influential. It was a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, but not the full reality. Solomon was known for his wisdom. This, too, came from God according to His promise. The Book entitled *Ecclesiastes* is a result of Solomon's lifelong experience. This is a Greek word derived from *Ekklesia*, which is translated as *assembly*. Solomon writes as one addressing the assembly of God's people. The Hebrew title, *Qoheleth*, is similar to this, being derived from *Qahal*. This, too, relates to the *convocation* or *assembly* of God's people. As we read this Book, therefore, it is as if we are drawn into a gathering of the people of God to be addressed by King Solomon.

The address is in a Hebraic style. In a Greek theatre we might expect a philosophical or scientific construction to the message. This would be of the form of a proposition followed by reasoning and a final conclusion that proves the proposition. Read in this way, Solomon's message might seem to have come from a man who was perplexed at the failure of his life. It would appear that he set out to understand his experiences and ended up confused. It is quite the opposite. Read through a Hebraic mindset the questions are asked knowing that there is an answer. In Hebraic thought, a question is as good as an answer. It is something to meditate upon and pray over. The questions of *Ecclesiastes* are asked in a provocative way, as if Solomon is searching for answers to the perplexing questions of life. He knows that other people ask such questions. Using this Hebraic literary style, Solomon leads us to his conclusion at the end of the Book.

If we lack insight into the Hebraic mind we might miss some of the depth of what the Bible conveys. This has happened in much of Christian theology when theologians have read the Scriptures through a Greek mindset. The result is academic theology rather than an encouragement to faith and relationship with God. The Hebraic mind asks questions and accepts paradox. The Greek mind demands logical answers.

An example of an interaction from a Hebraic perspective is in John Chapter 3. Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin. As such, he was experienced in Jewish tradition and deeply involved in interpreting Torah. If we do not know a little background he might come across as rather foolish in his conversation with Yeshua. He came to Yeshua to discover something more clearly, based on what he had heard from others. He, therefore, sought to provoke a response through a question. Yeshua knew how to prompt the question because He knew the question that Nicodemus should ask.

Nicodemus needed to understand how the concept of being born again was applied to the Kingdom of Heaven. The general idea of being born again was widely understood in Israel. It was not a new concept. To be born again was to enter a new stage of life or responsibility. Nicodemus was “born again” when he entered various new stages of his life. When he first became a member of the Sanhedrin, he was a beginner, just like a child coming into the world. Yeshua knew this and so He helped Nicodemus by using familiar terminology to prompt a question from him. When Nicodemus responded with the question in John 3:4, *how can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?*, it would seem that he had no idea of what he was asking. The question was asked to provoke a response from Yeshua, not because Nicodemus did not understand the concept of being born again. This allowed Yeshua to take the concept to a higher level in a way that was helpful. This was a dialogue in a Jewish context and not meant to be dissected with a Greek philosophical mindset. Elsewhere in the Gospels Yeshua teaches His disciples the same thing - they must come to the Father with child-like faith.

Just as in the dialogue involving Nicodemus, Solomon raises questions in Ecclesiastes, to lead us to the answer he has in mind. He draws us towards his conclusion through presenting perplexities from life that cannot be answered outside of faith in God. He reserves his conclusion to the end. All of us have one journey through life where, day by day, we encounter experiences that God uses to draw us to Him in faith. Solomon’s journey was very special because of his God-given wisdom. Whatever stage of the journey each of us is on, we will find relevance in what Solomon wrote. We will not find answers to our perplexing questions relating to faith through the philosophies of the world. Let our reading of Ecclesiastes be an opportunity to reflect on our life, whatever circumstance we are in, and to grow in faith, leaving unanswered questions with God, also cultivating a biblically-hebraic mindset.

## Day 1

Ecclesiastes Chapter 1. Solomon begins with the cry, *vanity of vanities*. From human understanding we might look back on a life that was totally in vain – purposeless. We might assess all our experiences and come to the conclusion that there was no purpose in all our strivings: we tried to “catch the wind in our hands”. God’s Spirit is likened to a wind. The Hebrew for both *wind* and *spirit* is *ruach*. We cannot fully understand the experiences of life, nor can we catch hold of them and fully examine them. Just like wind blows on us, the Holy Spirit works in our life in ways that God does not fully explain to us. Indeed, nor can we fully understand life’s experiences. Judged through human eyes, we go through life and nothing changes – our life seems worthless. Judged through God’s eyes we are being changed through life’s experiences. Solomon presents the case, at this stage of the Book, as if it is an unanswered riddle. We will come to his answer after he has established the background.

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Chapter 2. Solomon’s riches were immense. He was in an ideal position to teach the world that riches alone do not bring satisfaction in life. He was looking for satisfaction beyond the pleasures of life. This was quite different from the Greek philosophy, *eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die*. Solomon shows the foolishness of this while not yet presenting the conclusion of the matter.

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Chapter 3. All of us have experienced the light and shade of life. Verses 2 to 8 are well known and are often quoted. Whether we understand it or not we experience the seasons of this fallen world – a time to be born and a time to die and everything in between. God teaches us through the contrasts in life and, if we recognize this, we are drawn closer to him in all the seasons of our life. If not, we will invent human philosophies that are built on sand. The fool stumbles through life independent of God. To the natural eye those who do not know God may at times seem to succeed, but they fail in the end. Because Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden, having eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, we are all born into a world of contrasts, including good and evil. From the reality of this world we must seek God.

In this Chapter, Solomon begins to hint at the path of wisdom. He recognizes that for all mankind it is possible to know God. We all have the capacity to seek Him and trust Him – *He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from the beginning to end* (Verse 11). Fear of God means reverence for God. God’s purpose in the perplexities of our lives is that we put our trust in Him.

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Chapter 4. Solomon was an observer of people. He reflected on his observations of how men and women coped with the difficulties of life. Even Kings need to take note of what Solomon discovered. If we are isolated, we are vulnerable. If we have friends, we can help one another. God has not ordained that we suffer alone or have no-one to counsel or help us. He gave Eve to Adam as a helper and companion. This is the basis from which we learn that the family is the building block of a strong society on this earth. We grow together through the seasons of life. He also gives us friends who can lean on one another in times of need. This is part of the process where we learn to depend on God and the reason why He sent the Holy Spirit as Comforter and Counselor. He is the one who is with us to bring us to the Father through faith in His Son. Herein lies the deepest answer to man’s need of friendship. These truths can be discerned from Solomon’s reflections in the Chapter.

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## Day 2

Chapters 5 to 8. Read these four chapters today in the same prayerful attitude. This will remind you of the Book of Proverbs. The difference is that we are listening to Solomon thinking over issues, rather than presenting a summary of what he has learned. He is meditating on what he observes from his day-to-day encounters with people. It is a precious insight into the process of prayerful reflection from the man whom God endowed with wisdom and understanding. There are specific passages that will stand out as relevant to your own walk through life. Chapter 5 begins with Solomon considering times when commitments are made before God in the Temple courts. This is similar to our experiences in our places of worship today. The environment is different but the principles are the same. We experience, in the modern day context, what Solomon experienced in his day – there is nothing new under the sun! The final section of Chapter 8 is particularly important – death comes to all. This is the great issue that all men and women face. We can shut it out of our minds for a time, but it becomes a dominant theme at some point for all of us. It is the greatest issue to be tackled by all religions and philosophies. Solomon leads us to reflect on how we conduct our life and how we consider death. His book is soon to reach its climax.

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## Day 3

Chapter 9. Solomon continues with his contemplation of the inevitability of death. Solomon's great gift from God was wisdom, and he passes on to us the value of wisdom. Remember that this is not wisdom in a philosophical or worldly sense: it is God's gift through the Holy Spirit. The Jews learned two biblical principles for their lives, which they passed on to us. The first principle is the study of *Torah*, and the second is *halakhah*, how we walk before God. We are to look back to what we learn from the Patriarchs: this is *Torah*, the teaching of God made known throughout the Scriptures. *Torah* is to be at the foundation of life. The second principle is our daily pursuit, *halakhah* - how to walk out our lives. Many Jews, who reject Yeshua as Messiah, follow the Talmud, which is an attempt to order biblical understanding into a framework of living. The Talmud is an exposition of the Mishnah, which is a codification of Rabbinical tradition passed on through the years. This would be considered to be in harmony with Solomon's teaching. Indeed there is much practical wisdom to be found in the heritage of Jewish writings. This is not, however, what Solomon had in mind. He points to a walk with God that is relational. Disciples of Yeshua are privileged with a personal relationship with the Living God who raises Torah to a living reality. Solomon knew this walk with God. The wisdom he speaks about, in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, illustrates the life of the Spirit, which comes directly from God.

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Chapter 10. Drawing at times on figurative language, Solomon continues to show us examples of the fruits of wisdom. Recall that Ecclesiastes began as if Solomon were perplexed. He was setting the scene for his conclusions towards the end of the book, drawing the perplexed reader towards these conclusions. At this point, he is giving practical insights gained from his own observations in life.

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Chapter s 11 and 12. *Cast your bread upon the waters* brings an image of a farmer sowing seed and relying upon the rain to nourish it and bring a harvest forth. It is a metaphor for taking steps of faith. It is not a call to reckless behaviour. A farmer knows that in due time seed will grow, but he still has to take the step of faith of sowing his seed each year, or there will be no harvest. Solomon transfers his attention to young people, encouraging them to establish their lives in the ways of God while they are still young. Young people might think that life goes on forever and pay little heed to the ways of God. Solomon counsels that all other paths are in vain. It is best to learn to trust God while still young, or one day they may look back and regret a wasted life.

The purpose of the entire Book of Ecclesiastes is summed up in just two verses at the end of Chapter 12. This is preceded by the statement, *of making books is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh*. Solomon wrote this short Book and knew that more could be written, but enough is enough. Every religion and philosophy of mankind has produced millions of books since Solomon's day to try to explain matters of life and death. By contrast, in one small book, Solomon points us to our Creator and exhorts us to trust in Him for our daily life. God has given us His teaching: all that He intends as the foundation of our walk with Him is between the covers of our Bible. Approach Him with reverence and trust in Him for every detail of your life – this is the path of wisdom.

Ecclesiastes was written in the context of Ancient Israel. The Five Books of Moses were passed on through the generations and became known as *Torah*. They were the foundation on which the life of faith was to be built. David added the Psalms and Solomon the Proverbs and other writings, which were a result of their relationship with the Living God and contributed a testimony of how to walk with God through the inspiration of His Spirit. The same writings are as valid today as they were then and we now consider them in the light of Yeshua. To us, Ecclesiastes is like a Gospel message, because the full manifestation of what Solomon experienced is through faith in Yeshua. Through Yeshua we gain fellowship with God, the gift of wisdom for life through His Holy Spirit, and life eternal.

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## Day 4

We have paused in our reading of Solomon's reign to consider some of his writings. We know that he wrote much more than is contained in the Bible, but we have sufficient to know how God endowed him with wisdom. We will now read the Book of Job. First let us consider its possible origins.

The Bible contains several categories of Scripture. There are historical accounts concerning the actual people who lived in ancient days and whose lives God uses to build up our faith. There are also books of literature whereby a truth is expressed as a story. Just as in the literature of any nation, these stories reflect the lives of real people. In every nation we have the accounts of real people and also fictional stories about imaginary people. Story-telling has been a means of conveying ideas over thousands of years. Yeshua told short stories in the form of parables in this tradition. We do not know whether the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son were people He had known, but they could have been real people. It does not matter. What matters is that the stories were set in everyday life and used to convey a truth.

The *Ketuvim (Writings)* is one of the three sections of the *Tanakh (Old Testament)*. This is where we find Psalms, accounts of history, books of wisdom including Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and poetry, such as Song of Songs. The Book of Job is part of Ketuvim. No-one knows its author or when it was written. Some people see Job as a real person and others as fictional. Still others see him as based on a real person but largely fiction – a story that is told to illustrate an important truth, similar to a parable. It is appropriate to read the Book of Job at this point in our studies. Personally, I think it possible that the Book was written by Solomon or someone who learned from him. There are a number of passages that echo Proverbs, such as in Job 28:18 where we have an exact copy of Solomon's Proverb that wisdom is higher than rubies.

God may have chosen one man called Job to teach us important truths about suffering, or He may have inspired a story with extreme examples of suffering in order to teach us to trust God whatever our experience might be. There is no doubt that many people have suffered in this world, sometimes in great extremity. Indeed, the nation of Israel, as a whole, throughout history, has known immense suffering. The ultimate suffering was when Yeshua became a curse for us on the Cross. Therefore, even if Job is an invented character he is a profound illustration of what human beings experience, and the book is a help to every generation.

The writer of Job first presents the paradox of suffering, raising key questions, before leading us to his conclusion. The discourses in this book consider the questions that are raised in various circumstances in life. If Job is an imaginary person it gives the author an opportunity to use literary methods to convey his ideas. He uses extreme examples to help those in every circumstance. He also illustrates ideas about the unseen world to teach us spiritual truths, such as when Satan stands before God. Let us see what the inspired writer of Job has to tell us about suffering.

Job Chapter 1. The Book begins like many parables – *There once was a man...* Job is presented to us as a devout man who seeks to be right in God's eyes. He wanted to bring up his children in the ways of God and interceded for them daily. He is typical of any parent who seeks to live a righteous life and wants his children to be blessed by God. He sacrificed to God in a way that reflected practice in Israel. A picture is created whereby Satan seeks to harm Job. This is later paralleled in what Yeshua

said to Peter, that satan desired to sift him as wheat (Luke 22:31). We do not see into the heavenlies so the picture is sufficient to show us that satan exists with permission from God at times to test our faith. It is an illustrative picture rather than a literal one.

We learn from the Bible that all things must be tested and our faith matures through trials. Satan is given some scope to test God's people. God does not allow more than we can endure. This is illustrated when satan was given bounds by which he could test Job. Job showed faithfulness to God in the first test, when his children were killed through satan's devices. The first Chapter of Job introduces us to the reality of suffering in this world and that even the righteous suffer. God does not initiate this suffering but allows satan to bring suffering within limits. Satan is bent on destroying us and causing us to turn away from God. He seeks to mock us and undermine our faith, saying that faith in God depends on an easy life. God, on the other hand, gives us the opportunity to prove our faith and so defeat the wiles of satan. This interaction between suffering inflicted by satan in a fallen world, our response to it and God's ultimate purposes raises many questions for us all. One thing is certain: since Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden we all find ourselves in a world of suffering. The Book of Job does not deal with every question or provide a formula but introduces us to the reality that sometimes even the righteous suffer like Job. Our first lesson is from Job's reaction - he immediately confirmed his faith in God.

It is hard to imagine Job as the author of this Book because we, as readers, have insights that he did not have. We are shown that satan was seeking to destroy the righteous man. Job, from his point of view, was left with inexplicable difficulties. He, the most righteous man on earth, suffers from the most difficult circumstances that he could imagine. Job's circumstances help us to accept our own circumstances. They also point to the One who was even more righteous than Job. Yeshua suffered all that satan could throw at Him on the Cross, and triumphed over every evil of the world.

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Chapter 2. Job's sufferings continued. Before all his friends this man of great integrity seemed to be abandoned by God. His wife advised him to give up. She advised him to *curse God and die*. The word for *curse* is *barak*, and it can mean either *bless* or *curse*. The Hebrew word *barak* comes from the word for *knee* and is linked to the idea of bending the knee, as when a word of prophecy is being received from God. Such a word can be for good or bad effect, as we learned from passages of the Bible we have already studied.

Job's wife thought that his life might just as well be over and so he should speak his last words to God and die – he was finished. Then along came his friends to try to advise him. We cannot say that everything we experience on this earth is exactly like Job experienced it, but at some stage we are likely to find perplexing circumstances where there is no logical answer and where we alone must seek God. There may be times when even those closest to us will not understand. Every circumstance of life, especially times that are perplexing, are opportunities to express faith in God. There are times, whether through good or bad circumstances, where God is dealing with us one to one. In such cases faith is made real through inexplicable circumstances.

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Chapter 3. Job did not sin by denying God. Instead he looked at his own life. He was brought so low that he wished that he had never been born. This is the extremity to which God allowed him to go. We know that God had an end in view for Job, but at this time Job felt totally abandoned. At some point in this story all of us will find echoes of our own experiences. Remember that, right through the story, Job never once denied God and that God never once abandoned Job, even when He seemed distant from him. In the end satan was only a means of increasing Job's faith and testing it like fine metal. Job's friends were well-meaning but not one of them had sufficient understanding to comfort Job.

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Chapter 4. Eliphaz was the first to bring a word to Job. His discourse seems quite logical but it shows that he did not understand the ways of God. He thought that he understood Job's suffering through cause and effect. Job was, in his view, reaping what he had sown. This is a principle that has biblical foundations, but it was being misapplied in Job's case. Israel was taught through Moses that sin leads to judgement, but Job's situation was beyond this logic. This warns us all not to make our theologies so watertight that we fail to see that God is living and active in the affairs of men, sometimes beyond what we understand.

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## Day 5

Chapter 5. Eliphaz continued to touch matters of truth but not with full understanding. His counsel is over-simplistic and tends to condemn Job as having received from God what he deserves. He has some reasonable ideas but does not convey God's heart in the matter.

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1 Peter 4, James 1, John 9 and Matthew 6:9-15. Let us pause to review what we have read and also turn to some passages in the New Testament. The Book of Job is not a formula for understanding suffering. We are presented with a man who is righteous yet still suffers. All his friends think that they know the reason for the suffering and all of them are in error. It would be another error to derive yet another formula for suffering, saying that it was all satan's fault. We know that we would not be in this world of sin and sickness if it were not for the fact that satan deceived Adam and Eve. Therefore, he is behind all human suffering in that sense. We also know, however, that Adam and Eve contributed to their own fall in that they disobeyed God and did not believe all that He had told them. In this sense, there is a general truth in that we can bring suffering upon ourselves. The Book of Job, however, is not about cause and effect. It is concerned with trusting God in all circumstances and living a righteous and faithful life even through life's paradoxes. Job never blamed God or satan. He did not even blame himself: he simply endured through suffering holding firmly to his belief in God.

The New Testament brings us confirmation of the fact that all manner of trials come upon God's people and that we must hold fast to the faith through all times of perplexity. Sometimes we are forewarned of times of trial, such as in 1 Peter 4:12-13: *Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.* Sometimes we find ourselves in circumstances that we cannot explain and we know that our response is to let God build up our faith, such as in James 1:1-3: *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting. My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into various trials; knowing this, that the trying of your faith works patience.* If we are righteous like Job, God is close even if He sometimes seems to be distant. Even if satan appears to have gained a victory in our lives, ultimately it is not so. Through our suffering we gain some understanding of Yeshua's suffering. Indeed we at times share in His sufferings. These are the circumstances. The explanation is in God's hands and, in faith, that is where we leave them. Of course, suffering that we bring on ourselves through sin and neglect is quite a different thing, and that is where we must respond to the Holy Spirit's prompting to repentance.

Another Bible passage that warns us about not jumping to conclusions in the matter of suffering is the account of the man born blind in John 9. His blindness was neither due to his sin nor of his parents, but so that the glory of God might be revealed.

Let the Lord speak to you as you consider the testimony of Job. He alone knows all about your personal circumstances. Read these passages from the New Testament for further reflection.

Read the Lord's Prayer carefully (Matthew 6:9-15). Our study of Job, in the context of our own experiences, will help us to understand the importance of every part of the Lord's prayer.

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Chapter 6. Job is experiencing his troubles, whilst his friends are full of ideas. They do not feel what he feels and so the counsel also lacks sensitivity. Job senses this and distrusts Eliphaz's words. Job knows that he has sought to be righteous before God and knows, therefore, that this is not what God would say to him. This brings to mind the pastoral ministry in the Church today, and how important it is for pastors of God's people to minister through the Holy Spirit. Just as in Job's day, those who are suffering can discern when someone seeks to minister from a merely human mind or according to the inspiration of the Spirit. None of us want "Job's comforters" in times of need.

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Chapter 7. These are the honest reflections of a man who sees no end to his suffering. Job did not deny God but considered his life to be worthless. We know that this is not the end of the story and so the entire book must be read. When we suffer, we might find comfort in Job's responses to his sufferings. We might identify with Job in some way. We are not alone. We also find comfort in the conclusion later in the Book. Job's sufferings have led to insights which can be passed on to us.

Job 7:17 is an echo of Psalm 8:4. It is useful to read the Psalm at this point. We recall how David suffered for a number of years when Saul pursued him. This led to the writing of his great Psalms. How will we respond in times of perplexity when God seems distant and when there is no heartfelt understanding from our friends? Will we be like Job? Will we be like David? Indeed, more importantly, will we be like Yeshua?

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## Day 6

Chapter 8. Next Bildad came forward with his ideas. Imagine being in Job's situation and being told that his sons had been cast away from God because of their sins. Bildad was right that the wicked will be punished but he was not right in applying this in Job's case. This was both hurtful and, if Job had accepted it, dangerous. We must all learn from this how careful we must be with our opinions concerning someone else's circumstances, especially in the area of sin, punishment, sickness and healing. Recall Ecclesiastes 3:7: there is *a time to keep silence, and a time to speak*. Ecclesiastes 5:1-5 is also relevant teaching.

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Chapter 9. Could it be the case that Job's sufferings are leading him closer to God? Satan made a mistake, because he thought that Job would turn from God because of his sufferings. Satan hoped that Job would consider his desire to be righteous before God and consider his sufferings as unfair. Satan was wrong: God knew that Job would stand firm in the faith. Job only doubted himself and knew that God was trustworthy. Job stood alone because neither his wife nor his friends had good counsel.

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Chapter 10. Job turned to God in prayer. He had the confidence to be open with God and honest as to his feelings. Did God honour Job and see this as the fruit of integrity? We shall see as the discourse proceeds.

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## Day 7

### A Day for Rest and Further Reflection

Job 11 to 14. Zophar stepped forward next. Imagine the scene. Job is sitting on an ash heap considering his life to be over but not blaming God. His body is pained by incurable boils. Fire, raging winds and brutal enemies have robbed him, killing both his children and his servants. His philosophical friends stand round giving their opinions which come from knowledge *about* God but not out of a relationship *with* God. This is a picture of the suffering world as well as of righteous individuals who suffer in the world. Job has no answers but knows his integrity. Zophar knows that God is unsearchable in His judgements but still insists that Job has sinned and must repent. Job's answers are full of wisdom and are a source of comfort for God's people throughout all ages. The first few verses of Chapter 14 are used in funeral services. They are a source of reflection when we face the deepest questions of life and death, and cause us, like Job, to reach out to God from the perplexities of life. Continue to see how God speaks to you through the account of Job and his interaction with his friends. Who would you prefer to be, Job or one of his friends? Is it your desire to be close to God? Perhaps you will have trials that you do not understand. These will be occasions to sit where Job sat and, in the end be blessed by God. Perhaps you will have friends who suffer through difficult times whilst retaining their integrity. At such times we learn, from Job's friends, how careful we must be in what we say.

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