

# 14 TO THE LIMITS

Romone and his pastor talked after the funeral of his sister. Corella had died of cancer at the age of 27. She had a husband named Xavier and a three-year-old daughter named Issabell.

"You know, Pastor," said Romone, "my father died of cancer just about three years ago. Corella's death has brought back all those old feelings. I feel so empty, so sad, and even angry. I guess I'm angry at God for letting my dad die and now my sister. How long is God going to let these terrible things happen to me? It's too hard for me to understand."

Pastor Moreno laid his hand on Romone's shoulder. "I don't have any answers for you, Romone. I just know one thing. God wants you to speak your feelings and concerns. There is a part of Psalm 13 that goes something like this: 'How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I have pain in my soul, and be sorrowful all day long?'"

"You mean it says *that* in the Bible?" asked Romone. "I didn't think people were allowed to say that kind of stuff to God without God getting mad."

"Nothing is out of bounds as far as talking to God, Romone."

"Thanks," Romone said. "It helps to know that I don't have to keep these feelings and questions inside. Even if I have no answers now, at least I can talk to you and to God about them. Maybe answers will come later."

"Maybe answers will come, Romone."

## 3 STATEMENTS

- Ecclesiastes provides directions for living during the uncertainties of life and the certainty of death.
- There are limits to human understanding of the ways of God.
- It is okay to raise hard questions about our God and our faith even when it appears there are no good answers.

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*SOURCE*

## LIMITS TO HUMAN WISDOM

What answer would you give to Romone about the deaths of his father and sister? If you said that God willed their deaths, that would turn God into a horrible tyrant. To say that God *wills* death is to defeat the purpose of creation itself—life and relationships.

On the other hand, what if you said that death just happens as a natural part of life and that God is powerless to stop it? God then would become some weak and powerless being who is incapable of fulfilling any promise. The world and our lives would be without any ultimate control. We would be in bondage to the whims of fate. We would always be in fear wondering when "our number would be up."

The book of Proverbs is a book of wisdom that contains many answers to the daily questions of life—how to live, what things in life are important, and how to live in a good relationship with God and with others. But in the face of hard questions like death and human suffering, Proverbs is silent.

The Old Testament contains two books that dare to journey to the limits of human experience. The books of Job and Ecclesiastes face the difficult questions of suffering and death, but they provide no easy answers. It is interesting to note that these two “question books” form a frame around the “answer books” of Psalms and Proverbs.

The writer of Ecclesiastes, who is called “the preacher,” asks basic questions about the value of human wisdom, human pleasure, and human work. The preacher does not provide answers. Instead, hard questions are asked about the world, human life and work, and the eternal things of God. *Ecclesiastes provides directions for living during the uncertainties of life and the certainty of death.*

The preacher begins the book by looking around at the world. Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11.

1. What does the author mean in verse 2?

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2. List three words that you would use to describe the author’s attitude toward life.

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3. Check the statements below that the author would agree with.

- Every cloud has a silver lining.
- There’s no free lunch.
- It’s just the same old thing day after day.
- The early bird catches the worm.
- Early to bed, early to rise makes one healthy, wealthy, and wise.

From talking about the ceaseless motions of life that bring no new things, the preacher narrows the focus to human life and work. Read Ecclesiastes 2:18-23.

4. Who receives the fruit of all human labor?

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5. Verse 20 says, “So I turned around and gave my heart up to despair.” What does it mean “to despair” over something?

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6. What is the difference between feeling sad and giving up your “heart to despair”?

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So far, the writer would win no awards for being one who looks on the brighter side of things. As the preacher moves to discuss the eternal things of time and God, it does not get much brighter. Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-9.

7. Is the preacher’s attitude and outlook on life any better here? Explain your answer.

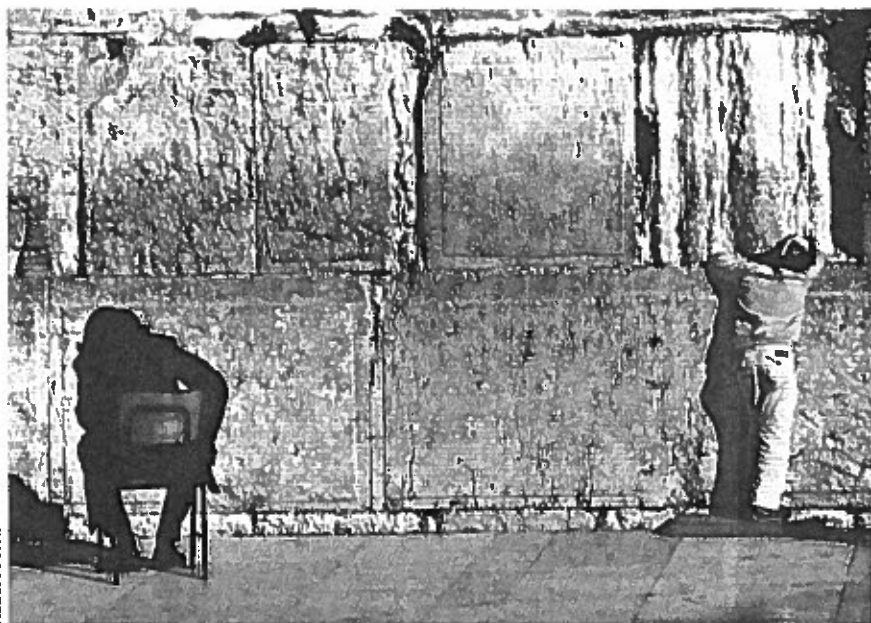
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8. Based on these verses, how do you understand the ability of people to shape their own future and that of the world?

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*Ecclesiastes provides directions for living during the uncertainties of life and the certainty of death.*

Worshippers at Walling Wall in Jerusalem



Robert Fried

The preacher has asked hard questions. Indeed, the tone of the writer is one of criticism and despair. "Is that all there is to life?" we ask. Only at the very end of the book does the author give us any hope. Read Ecclesiastes 12:13-14.

9. In light of this life that the author calls "vanity of vanities" (Ecclesiastes 1:2), what finally is there for people to do?

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10. In what ways does the preacher leave you with the assurance of hope?

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11. Is that "answer" sufficient for your life? Explain your answer.

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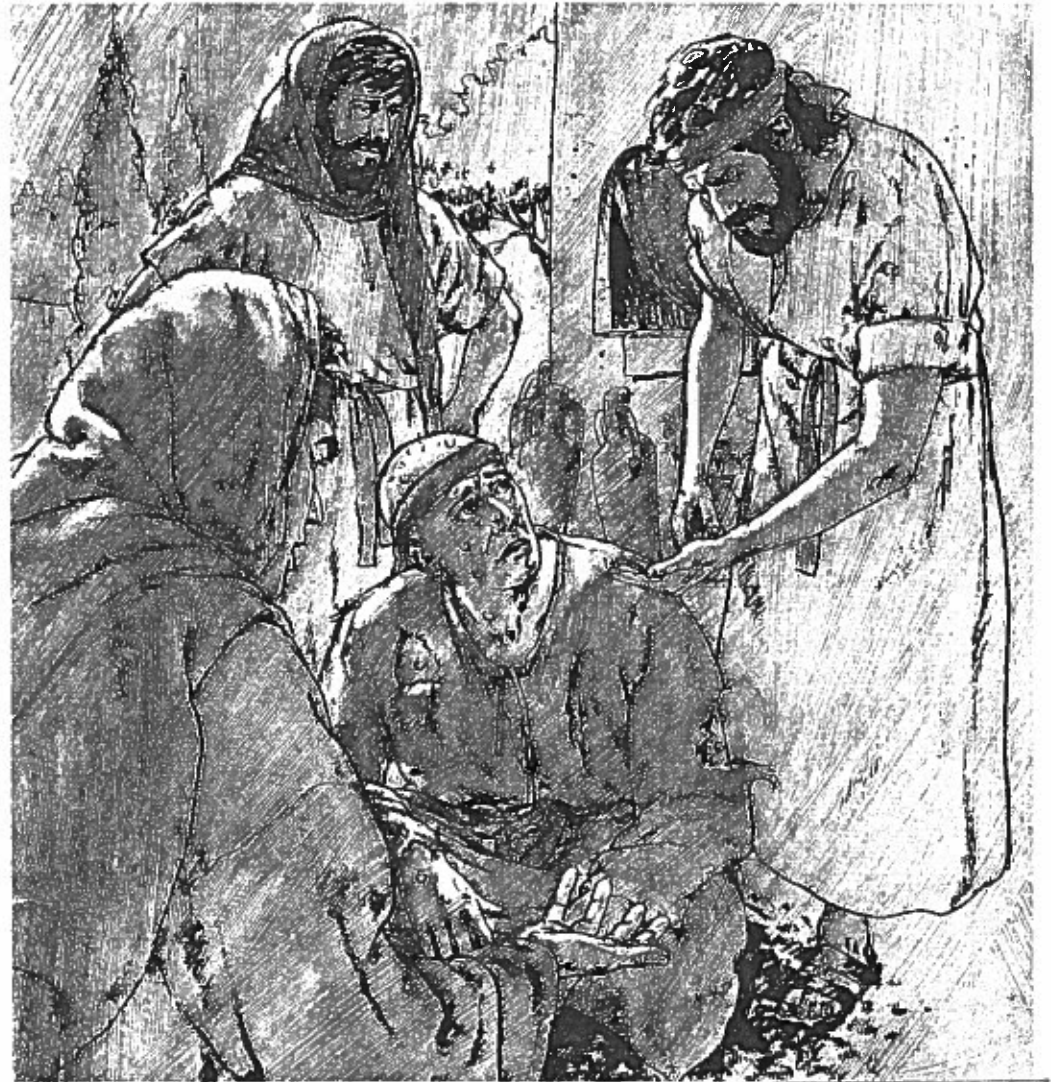
## LIMITS OF HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

The Book of Job is another "question book" in the Bible. It deals with the difficult issues of suffering and death, issues raised by the preacher in Ecclesiastes. One thing is clear after reading the story of Job. *There are limits to human understanding of the ways of God.*

The whole book of Job is a series of dialogs. One set of dialogs is between Job and three friends who come to comfort him in his sorrow. Another set of dialogs is between Job and God. The question considered in these dialogs is this: "If God is powerful and able to do all things, and if God is loving and kind, why do good and innocent people sometimes suffer so much?"

Job's friends came to give him comfort after he had lost his whole family and all of his wealth. Job himself was sitting in sackcloth on a pile of ashes, symbolic of his broken condition.

*There are limits to human understanding of the ways of God.*



Each friend offered his explanation of why Job was suffering. They seemed to think that Job had committed some terrible sin and that if Job would just confess it, all would be restored by God.

To each of these so-called friends, Job spoke a loud "No." Job claimed his innocence and shook his fist in anger at God. Throughout most of the book the friends put Job on trial to protect the innocence of God in the whole matter. Toward the end of the book, Job placed God on trial. Read Job 30:17-26.

1. How did Job say God had treated him?

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2. According to verses 24-26, how had Job responded to God's actions?

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Throughout the whole book God remained silent. After hearing the words of the friends and Job's accusations against God, God responded to Job. God placed Job himself on the witness stand. Read Job 38:1-7 carefully, then quickly scan Job 38:8—40:2.

3. How do you describe God's questioning of Job?

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4. How did God explain the actions God had done?

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5. At the end of God's questioning of Job, Job responded to God. Read Job 42:3. What did Job confess about his angry outbursts against God?

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6. Read Job 42:7. What judgment did God make on the friends who tried to defend God by claiming that Job's sin caused his suffering?

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7. What did God say about Job and his angry outbursts?

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Is the question of suffering and death ever answered? It does not appear to be, but at least one thing can be said with certainty. Although in suffering we reach the hard limits of human wisdom and understanding, we can know that God is present with us in that suffering.

## LIMITS OF THE HUMAN QUEST

Neither the preacher, Job, nor we can completely understand the way and will of God. We cannot penetrate the mystery of God. Indeed, Martin Luther (1483-1546) wrote that one does not deserve to be called a theologian who thinks he or she can understand God by things that can be seen. True Christian theologians, on the other hand, are those who look only to the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Luther always said that God cannot be understood except through suffering and the cross.



However, this God whose ways are beyond us calls us to ask and struggle with the difficult questions of suffering, death, and life. *It is okay to raise hard questions about our God and our faith even when it appears there are no good answers.*

We need to ask questions and to think about them even though we may not reach a solution to all the puzzles of life. God said Job was good because he asked the difficult questions of God.

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## Shaping life

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### PRESSING THE LIMITS

Read the story of Romone and his pastor on page 76.

1. If you were Pastor Moreno or one of Romone's friends, how would you respond to Romone's final statement, "Maybe answers will come later"?

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The writer of Ecclesiastes said, "So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair" (Ecclesiastes 2:20).

2. Describe a time when someone you know gave his or her heart "up to despair."

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What has helped this person to move out of despair into hope?

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*It is okay to raise hard questions about our God and our faith even when it appears there are no good answers.*

At many times in life, people feel at the point of despair. They may despair over the loss of a loved one or their own health. They may despair over a future that appears to be cut off or dried up. Indeed, sorrow and despair are perhaps a greater part of life than are joy and fulfillment.

God's promises have not been that we be "healthy, wealthy, and wise," but that God will remain faithful to us. God does not abandon us to fate and chance.

### UNLIMITED HOPE

How, then, are Christians to respond to the hard questions of life and the limits we run up against?

There is one response that is not really an "answer." It is a response with which you will probably struggle for years before it "sinks in." That response to the limits of human wisdom and understanding is, "Live the question and live it in faith."

For Lutherans, faith has nothing in common with any attempt to create strength or courage by our own efforts. Faith exists only as a response to God's Word. The Word alone gives faith its form. This Word is the word of "promise," that is, of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ who died with a hard question on his lips, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), you, too, can have unlimited hope in the God who loves you and saves you from the terrors of the darkness.

### FURTHER

## opportunities

#### Bible Reading

Select one or more passages from the list below. After reading it, summarize its main point. Tell how it relates to the session. List one or two thoughts you had as you read the passage.

- Ecclesiastes 1:1-18
- Isaiah 40:1-8
- Psalm 39:7-13
- Mark 15:33-39
- Job 40:1-14

#### Memory

Memorize Ecclesiastes 12:13-14. After the preacher had spoken all the complaints and voiced despair, this finally was all that could be said.

#### Activity 1

Ask your librarian for a copy of the play "J.B." by Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982). Read the play,

# FOCUS

## ON THE TIME BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS: PART 2

The Maccabees (mac-a-BEES) were a family of priests who took it upon themselves to recapture and cleanse the temple in Jerusalem after the Greeks were defeated.

Other Jewish national groups of the time were not as military, but they, too, expected God to raise up a new political ruler or *messiah* from the line of David.

Still other Jewish groups did not look for an earthly king, but for a heavenly "son of man" figure. This "son of man" would come at the end of time, flying on the clouds of heaven. He would bring God's judgment and God's kingdom to the world once and for all. This "son of man" image is found in the book of Enoch which dates from sometime between 200 B.C. to A.D. 100.

The book of 2 Esdras (EZ-dras) speaks of a human from the sea who also rides on the clouds of heaven. This human does not fight the battle against evil with military weapons but with the word out of his mouth that destroys all enemies and that gathers all those who are faithful.

Another important Jewish group that dealt with the persecution and difficulties of this period was the Essenes (is-SEENS). The Essenes were a Jewish sect who lived by themselves in the desert near the Dead Sea. The Essene community lived a very strict life. They remained separate from the world in order to await the time when God would overthrow all the powers of evil and begin God's kingdom. They anticipated a major war in the future that would involve "the war of the sons of light against the sons of darkness." The community of Essenes would be led through this war by a priest and a messiah-king who would celebrate a victory banquet at the end of time.



Betty Groskin

Site of Masada fortress ruins

which is a modern adaptation of the story of Job. Write a one page report on how MacLeish's play answers the question of suffering.

### Activity 2

Although Job's friends had the wrong answer to Job's suffering, they did one thing right. According to Job 2:11-13, when they came to Job they sat with him. Sometimes just being with someone in his or her sorrow is enough. If you know someone who is sorrowful, go to him or her. Just be present. Sometimes he or she may wish to talk, other times no conversation may happen. Your presence can be very helpful, for it shows that you care.

### Activity 3

As a class, prepare a promise booklet offering words from the Bible of hope, comfort, and God's love. Illustrate the booklet and put it into the church library for those who are suffering and in despair.