A hot spring in Yellowstone National Park brings mineralogy to the surface of the earth. Photo credit: Carl Fictorie (2012)

SCRIPTURE:

“Surely there is a mine for silver, and a place for gold to be refined. Iron is taken out of the earth, and copper is smelted from ore. Miners put an end to darkness, and search out to the farthest bound the ore in gloom and deep darkness.

“They put their hand to the flinty rock, and overturn mountains by the roots. They cut out channels in the rocks, and their eyes see every precious thing. The sources of the rivers they probe; hidden things they bring to light.

“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. It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, in precious onyx or sapphire. Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold.

“Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air. “God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. when he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the thunderbolt;
then he saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out. And he said to humankind, ‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.’"

—Job 28, selected verses (NRSV). You are encouraged to read the entire chapter.

**MEDITATION:**
Tucked away in the middle of Job, easily overlooked by those trying to understand the trials of the title character and by those scientists who revel in the majesty of the Leviathan, is this wisdom poem. In the first stanza (Job 28:1–11), we are introduced to miners whose efforts glean silver, gold, iron, copper, sapphires, and other precious things. We are told of their burrowing into the depths of the earth to seek out these treasures, and the description illustrates their skill and technique in extracting and modifying these ores and minerals—an ode to science in general and to the beginnings of the discipline of chemistry in particular.

But then the poem turns and points out a problem. Despite the successes of the miners in the development of their knowledge of minerals, they have not found wisdom or understanding (v. 12). The second stanza of the poem (vv. 13–19) points out that the act of digging to the depths of the world does not reveal it, and its value is far greater than all the wealth of precious metals and gemstones that the miners draw out of the earth.

The refrain repeats (v. 20), opening the final stanza (vv. 21–28). Here we learn that wisdom and understanding are hidden, not just to the miners, but from all the living, and even from Death and Destruction. Wisdom and understanding are known to God. But there’s a twist. Tom McLeish (Faith & Wisdom in Science) notes that God himself looks over and through creation, noting his making of the creation, and then observes that wisdom (the “it” in v. 27) is established in and sought out in that created order. The poem concludes with a declaration paralleling Proverbs 1:7: that wisdom is found in fearing the Lord.

**REFLECTION:**
In a surface reading, this passage seems to contrast the knowledge and skill of the miners with the wisdom and understanding originating in God. McLeish suggests, however, “that wisdom is to be found in participating in a deep understanding of the world, its structure and dynamics.” In the last stanza, God takes a human view and talks of how he searched for, saw, declared, and established wisdom in creation, but only after he surveyed his creation and considered how he made it. The fear of the Lord and a departure from evil is not a command to reject the work of gaining knowledge and skill from the
creation but, rather, that work is a means to develop that wisdom and understanding.

For those with ears to hear, those who seek God, those who know that God is the source of wisdom, the study of and shaping of the material of creation is, indeed, a means of faithful service and worship to God. Christians working in the sciences need not reject or segregate their knowledge of creation from their faithful search for wisdom; they can see wisdom in the handiwork of the Creator.

Reference:

**PRAYER:**
Creator God, almighty maker of all that we see and hear and smell and taste and touch, you are the source of all wisdom and understanding. Forgive us when we forget to notice and acknowledge your power and divinity evident in the creation, and when we fail to learn your wisdom. May your Spirit stir in our hearts a great awe in your works and a strong desire to gain wisdom. Thank you for the opportunities to study your world and to participate in its flourishing and development. May the work of my hands and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, Creator of precious metals and gemstones and redeemer of all creation. Amen.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
Carl Fictorie, ASA Fellow, is Professor of Chemistry at Dordt University (Sioux Center, Iowa). He teaches chemistry on the physical/analytical end of the discipline, and does research in chemical kinetics, biofuels, philosophy of chemistry, and theology of science. He is the husband of Kathy, the father of three children, an amateur photographer and woodworker, and a member of First Christian Reformed Church, Sioux Center. Carl also serves as the president of the ASA Prairie Chapter.