

*New Peace from Ancient Wisdom*

**The Fear of the Lord**

Proverbs 1:1-7

I invite you to stand and read with me God's Word as found in Proverbs 1:1-7.

- <sup>1</sup> The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:
- <sup>2</sup> for attaining wisdom and discipline;  
for understanding words of insight;
- <sup>3</sup> for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,  
doing what is right and just and fair;
- <sup>4</sup> for giving prudence to the simple,  
knowledge and discretion to the young--
- <sup>5</sup> let the wise listen and add to their learning,  
and let the discerning get guidance--
- <sup>6</sup> for understanding proverbs and parables,  
the sayings and riddles of the wise.
- <sup>7</sup> The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,  
but fools despise wisdom and discipline. NIV

From the very outset, Solomon (the writer of the majority of the Proverbs), lays before you and me the only two options for living our lives. We can live our lives according to the *fear of the Lord*. Or we can live our lives according to the *foolishness of the world* around us.

The story is told of a world-class woman runner who entered a 10-kilometer race in Connecticut. On the day of the race, she drove from New York City, following the directions she had previously been given (at least as he understood them). On the way, she got lost. So she stopped at a gas station and asked for help. The only indicator she has is that the race was to begin in the parking lot of a nearby shopping mall. The attendant of the gas station did know of a race that was scheduled just up the road. When she arrived, she was relieved to see in the parking lot a certain number of runners preparing to compete. There were certainly not as many as she had anticipated, however. She hurried to the registration table, announced herself, and was surprised at the official's excitement at having so renowned an athlete show up for their event. Though they had no record of her entry, if she would just hurry, put on a number, she could be in line before the gun would go off! Well, she ran and won easily – four minutes before the first man! But it was only after the race that she learned that the race she had just run was *not* the race she intended to run. That race was being held several miles farther up the highway in another town. She had gone to the wrong starting line, run the wrong course, strained for the wrong finish line and won a cheap prize.<sup>i</sup>

Two races, two starting points, two finish lines. One is described as the way of wisdom. The other as the way of fools.

In these initial seven verses, Solomon outlines clearly for us the purpose of this book. His bottom line thesis is simple: If you don't fear God, if you don't want the way of wisdom, you're wasting your time reading the rest of this book.

## Wisdom

The fear of the Lord is both the *foundation* and *fruit* of wisdom. We can't understand the meaning and implications of the *fear of the Lord* apart from understanding the biblical concept of wisdom.

What is wisdom? For sure, it is *not* mere knowledge. We see all around us an explosion of knowledge. And yet while knowledge on all fronts is increasing, wisdom is becoming more and more rare. Our society is full of intellectual giants who are pygmies in the art of living.<sup>ii</sup> One of my own teachers, Haddon Robinson, has said, "Alumni from noted universities have mastered information about a narrow slice of life but couldn't make it out of the first grade when it comes to living successfully with family and friends."<sup>iii</sup>

What then is wisdom from God's perspective? Wisdom is *skill in living*. It is not merely mental, nor is it simply moral. Biblical wisdom is very practical. Even in this passage before us it is described as *both* understanding and doing.

<sup>2</sup> for attaining wisdom and discipline;  
for ***understanding*** words of insight;  
<sup>3</sup> for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,  
***doing*** what is right and just and fair;

In Exodus 35 a man named Bezalel was giving the ability to design stone and metal for the tabernacle. Where did such ability come from? Moses describes him as filled with the Spirit and wisdom. Psalm 107:27 refers to one who has skills of seamanship. The same word *hokma* – wisdom – is used. Wisdom is not simply mental or even moral. It is also practical. Wisdom is skill in living. You can be intellectually brilliant but a complete fool at the same time.

To make sure we grasp this important concept, Solomon uses various near synonyms for wisdom in these verses, all of which are "intimate sisters" (we could say) of this idea of wisdom.

## Understanding

One of these is the word *understanding*: "...for ***understanding*** words of insight" (2b, cf. v. 6). Again, this is not merely a mental word, but a moral word. It means to separate, discriminate, to discern truth from error, what is good from what is evil, the best from the good. When Solomon made his request for wisdom he prayed:

So give your servant a *discerning* heart to govern your people and to *distinguish between right and wrong*. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?  
1 Kings 3:9<sup>iv</sup>

In July of 2006, the world-famous geneticist William French Anderson was convicted of child molestation charges. In a press conference, his attorney said, "Nothing about having a 176 I.Q. means you have good judgment."<sup>v</sup> Wisdom is understanding, discernment, good judgment for living life.

## **Discipline**

Such understanding and discernment comes about, however, through *discipline*. Notice what Solomon says in verse 2: "...for attaining wisdom and *discipline*." In some versions, this word is translated as "instruction." I believe the best translation here however is *discipline*. The word speaks of God's correction that brings us into conformity to His will.

Later on, in Proverbs 3:11 we read: "My son, do not despise the LORD's *discipline* and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD *disciplines* those he loves."<sup>vi</sup> The same word is also found in Proverbs 23:13, "Do not withhold *discipline* from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die."

The writer to the Hebrews cites these very verses from Proverbs and then adds, "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons" (Hebrews 12:7). Wisdom embraces God's discipline in our lives as an expression of his love, moving us from immaturity to maturity.

Where do we get our word disciple? It comes from the word *discipline*. Wisdom is hard won. It is for serious *disciples*.

## **Prudence**

That leads us to a third sister term used for wisdom in these verses. It's found in verse 3:

... for acquiring a disciplined and *prudent* life,  
*doing what is right and just and fair.*

That word "prudent" is sometimes also translated "wise." But it's a different word in the Hebrew language. Its explanation is found in the latter half of verse 3: doing what is right, just and fair. Proverbs wasn't written to make us witty, or cunning. It was written in order to instill basic moral guidance for all of life.

The French mathematician, René Descartes, said, "I think, therefore I am." He elevated cognitive "thinking" to being the criteria of personal existence. With Descartes logic, reason, knowledge became the key virtues defining the value of one's existence. This ultimately gave birth to the so-called Enlightenment and the scientific method.

And whether we like it or not, this world-view has influenced our culture and even our churches more than we think. Think about it. Even in hospitals today, the determining factor in taking someone off life support is whether or not they are "brain-dead" – i.e. no longer capable of transmitting brainwave evidence of life.<sup>vii</sup>

"I think, therefore I am." But why not "I love, I serve, I breathe, I love...therefore I am?"

I trust by now you've gotten the idea that wisdom is not merely mental, it is moral and practical. It is not mere knowledge, but skillfulness in living. And this understanding of wisdom is the big idea of this book. No wonder Solomon says so urgently in 4:7, "Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding."

## Fear of the Lord

There is, however, a fourth and final synonym used for wisdom in these verses. It is called the *fear of the Lord*. The fear of the Lord is both the *foundation* and *fruit* of wisdom. It is the beginning of wisdom and it is the culmination of wisdom. Solomon says “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10; cf. 1:7). But in chapter two he describes the fear of the Lord as the fruit, or outcome of wisdom. “My son, if you accept my words...turning your ear to wisdom...*then* you will understand the fear of the Lord” (Proverbs 2:1,2,5).

Maybe you react negatively to this concept. It sounds so old-fashioned and antiquated. Fear feels bad. After all, who wants to fear? We associate the idea of fear with negative experiences of cold, austere, authoritarian rule. Or maybe you think of a fearful experience in the past with a friend or even an abusive parent. Or maybe you think of those famous lines from Star Wars: “Fear is the path that leads to the Dark Side. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering.” Remember how Yoda pauses, sighs and says to Anakin, “I sense much fear in you.” As one has said, “Fear is that little darkroom where negatives are developed.”<sup>viii</sup> So how can any kind of fear be a positive thing in our lives?

The very Bible that tells us to fear the Lord, also records multiple times God’s words to us, “Do not fear!” So what’s the deal? Doesn’t the Bible say, “Perfect love casts out fear?”

Remember the little quiz we took last week. What is the fear of the Lord?

- Respect for God?
- Awe at God’s power and holiness?
- Concern to please God?
- Fear of God’s judgment?
- All of the above?

The fear of the Lord is above all the fear *of the Lord*. True wisdom, of which the fear of the Lord is both the foundation and fruit, begins *with God*. “Anyone who comes to God must believe that He exists and rewards those who diligently seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. But the beginning of the fear of the Lord is acknowledging God for who he is. Only the fool has “said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” (Psalm 14:1).

The fear of the Lord is not only acknowledging that God exists, but also to stand in awe, wonder and reverence before the splendor of his character. The godly Christian, the Christian who fears God, sees God first in his awesome holiness and majesty before he sees him in his love, mercy and grace. This is the consistent experience of believers throughout the Bible. God spoke to Abram who prostrated himself on the ground to listen. The awesome God of Israel appeared to Moses who had to hide his face and take off his sandals before God’s presence in the burning bush. The prophet Isaiah saw a revelation of God’s majesty and cried out, “I’m finished, I’m a man of unclean lips.” And when John the apostle saw a revelation of the risen Christ on the island called Patmos, John fell at Christ’s feet as though he were dead.

In 1717, Louis XIV of France died. Louis, who called himself “the Great,” was the monarch who declared, “I am the State!” His court was the most magnificent in Europe and his funeral the most spectacular. His body lay in a golden coffin. To dramatize his greatness, orders had

been given that the cathedral would be very dimly lit with only a special candle set above the coffin. Thousands waited in silence. Then Bishop Massilon began to speak. Slowly reaching down, he snuffed out the candle, saying, "Only God is great."<sup>ix</sup>

If we lack in the church today such reverent awe for God, it's because we don't know who our God is. If our prayers are flippant, if our worship is irreverent, if our conduct is inconsistent with our creed, it's because we lack the fear of God in our hearts. The way of the wise magnifies God and minimizes self. The way of the fool magnifies self, and minimizes God.

The fear of God does something else for us. It teaches us to hate sin. "To fear the LORD is to hate evil," Solomon says (Proverbs 8:13). And elsewhere he says, "through the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil" (Proverbs 16:6). That's probably why Andrew Murray once said, "The fear of God is the soul of godliness."<sup>x</sup>

For years, the opening of ABC's *The Wide World of Sports* illustrated "the agony of defeat" through the painful ending of an attempted ski jump. The skier appeared in good form as he headed down the slope, but then, for no apparent reason, he tumbled head-over-heels off the side of the jump and bounced off the supporting structure.

What viewers didn't know was that he chose to fall. Why? As he explained later, the jump surface had become too fast, and midway down the ramp he realized that if he completed the jump, he would land on the level ground, beyond the safe landing zone, which could have been fatal. As it was, the skier suffered no more than a headache from the tumble.

The fear of the slope, the fear of flying too high, and the fear of the fall led him to change course. Fear led to life. In the same way, the fear of the Lord turns you and me from the snares of death.<sup>xi</sup> Proverbs 14:27 says, "The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death."

The fear of the Lord is a teaching for believers. As we grow in wisdom, we are motivated by two important factors: the fear of God and the love of God. We cannot fully appreciate the latter until we grasp the former. The fear of God emphasizes God's otherness, his awesomeness, his holiness. The love of God emphasizes, of course, his nearness, his grace, his mercy. Both work in tandem as important motivating factors in the life of faith.

As believers, we do not fear God's judgment. But we do stand in awe before his holiness. And as a result, we are led to an intense hatred of sin and reverence for God.

But the fear of the Lord is also a teaching for unbelievers. Jesus said, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28-29). If you are here today and have never placed your faith in Jesus Christ as the forgiver of your sin and the leader of your life...then you *do* have something to fear. The Bible says, "It is appointed unto each person once to die, but after that comes the judgment."

My sin, your sin, every person's sin must be judged. Either you will die eternally for your sin, or you can place your faith in the One who has already taken your judgment – Jesus Christ – and live eternally. The choice is yours. One is the path of wisdom. The other the pathway of

foolishness. The one course leads to life; the other course leads to death. The starting lines and finish lines are very different. Don't mistake one for the other.

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from D. Bruce Lockerbie, "The Starting Point," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Jan-March, 1986), 8.

<sup>ii</sup> John E. Johnson, "An Analysis of Proverbs 1:1-7," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Oct – Dec, 1987), 419.

<sup>iii</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, cited by Johnson, *ibid*.

<sup>iv</sup> Cf. "But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to *distinguish* good from evil." Heb 5:14

<sup>v</sup> "The Buzz," World (7-29-06), p. 12 as cited on [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. Job 5:17-18 "But consider the joy of those corrected by God! Do not despise the chastening of the Almighty when you sin. NLT

<sup>vii</sup> Insight taken from D. Bruce Lockerbie, "The Starting Point," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Jan-March, 1986), 3. Admittedly, the term "brain-dead" is a technical term indicating death. The point is not that the state of being "brain-dead" is anything less than actual death, but rather that the terminology used (which causes much confusion) has been highly influenced by the age of reason.

<sup>viii</sup> Michael Pritchard as cited in Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations and Quotes*, 294.

<sup>ix</sup> Taken from Jeffrey Arthurs, "A House of Wisdom," <http://www.preachingtoday.com/40792>.

<sup>x</sup> John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 229 as cited by John E. Johnson, 430.

<sup>xi</sup> Adapted from Jeff Arthurs, "Clearing the Debris," [PreachingToday.com](http://PreachingToday.com)