

Wisdom

Proverbs 1:7, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

Question: If God is love, why am I supposed to fear him?

Key Verses: James 1:5; Deuteronomy 10:12; Ecclesiastes 12:13

Proverbs 1:7 is the theme of the entire book following a brief introduction (1:1-6). Since Proverbs is the Bible’s repository on wisdom, it is a fitting phrase to capture the heart of the whole book. This theme is repeated two more times in almost identical wording: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” (Prov 9:10 = Psalm 111:10) and “The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor” (Proverbs 15:33).

There are two words in this famous phrase that beg for an explanation: Fear and Wisdom. If we were to ask someone to fill in the blank: “The _____ of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” the word fear would not likely be people’s first choice. Perhaps “The love of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Or “The knowledge of the Lord” or “obedience to the Lord” might be better options. As it turns out “fear,” “knowledge,” “love,” and “obedience” are all synonymous in this context. How? Let’s begin our investigation by clarifying what the Bible means by wisdom.

Wisdom

Often the word conjures up images Yoda or perhaps some guru sitting cross-legged pondering the mysteries of the universe. For the Jews of the Bible, wisdom was more bolted to everyday experience. Wisdom in the Bible is the ability to practically live out God’s truths in a way that brought health to you, your family, and your community. It is the skill a builder needs to construct a house, a general needs to win a war, and a father needs to raise his children. Furthermore, it is not just practical skill for you and yours. It is an apologetic for God to be famous among the nations.

Here is an example of how the rabbi’s thought about wisdom: “Observe them [God’s commands] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people” (Deuteronomy 4:6). When other nations observed Jewish families, communities, businesses and ethics, they were drawn to Yahweh. He just makes life better. His “rules” work. Jesus stood squarely in that tradition. In his own words, responding to his critiques, he said, “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds” (Matthew 11:19).

Biblical wisdom is always embodied. Joshua’s wisdom empowered him to lead an army (Deut 34:9). Ezra’s enabled him to administrate a community (Ezra 7:25). By wisdom Daniel

lived ethically in exile (Dan 1:4). The most famous sage, of course, was Solomon. When he succeeded his father David, God offered him a blank check in prayer. Here is what he asked, "Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people, for who is able to govern this great people of yours?" (2 Chronicles 1:10). God's answer was a resounding "YES"! "God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kings 4:29–30).

This kind of wisdom is of inestimable value. It endures longer than looks, is more valuable than vaults of gold or vats of wine, it is more gratifying than all earthly entertainments. That's why the Bible behooves us to acquire wisdom at all costs. Such precious wisdom is portrayed as a woman: "Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight. Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her" (Prov 4:5–8; see also Prov 1:20; 3:13f; 7:4f; 8:1f, 11-14; 9:1-3).

The portrait of wisdom as a woman is both picturesque and powerful. It also points to another overarching truth about wisdom. Because true wisdom comes from God, Scriptures don't just portray wisdom as a woman but as the actual Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit brokers in and embodies wisdom. Wisdom is a gift of the Spirit, not as an inanimate attribute but as a living, breathing relationship to himself. Wisdom is not a gift given but a personal appearance. Wisdom is when the Spirit of God animates and engages a person for God's good (Deut 34:9; Isa 11:2; Acts 6:3, 10; 1 Cor 2:13; Eph 1:17; Col 1:9). Take Solomon as an example. When he asked for wisdom, God gave himself in the abiding presence of the Spirit to help Solomon lead on God's behalf.

That being said, is Solomon the wisest man who ever lived? Or would that be Jesus? Both are true in one sense. However, if we parse it out theologically, Solomon was the wisest man while Jesus is wisdom itself. While Solomon had wisdom because the Spirit was with him, Jesus IS Wisdom because he shares the same essence as the Spirit. This is why Paul could say, "Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24). Or as he says in another place, in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3). Let's press pause here and turn to the other key phrase of Proverbs 1:7.

Fear of the Lord

If God is love, why in the world would we fear him? Doesn't the Bible say that perfect love casts out fear? (1 John 4:18). Doesn't it say we have a spirit of power NOT fear? (2 Tim 1:7). Indeed, it does. No Christian should be terrified of punishment since Christ paid our debt. Nor should we fear failure since we are empowered by the Holy Spirit. Fair enough. However, fear and love are not antonyms. The most obvious example is that we can fear and adore an

earthly father. Remember when you were a kid and he threw you to the moon? The very strength that comforted you also instilled a healthy fear in you. So it is with our Father in Heaven, “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him,” (Psalm 103:13). Fear and love are frequently lodged in the same verse, both pointing to God. “Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love,” (Psalm 33:18). “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him” (Psalm 103:11; see also Deut 10:12; Psa 5:7; 103:17; 118:4; 147:11). The same principle is also true with fear and honor cohabitating in civic leaders (Luke 18:2, 4; 1 Pet 2:17). You can fear someone out of respect for their power while cringing before them because of their wrath.

The crucial question is not whether fear and other emotions can hold hands. The crucial question is what my hands should do when I fear someone. That answer is easy and obvious—you obey them. This combination is captured in a single statement, “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to **fear** the LORD your God, to **walk** in all his ways, to **love** him, to **serve** the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,” (Deuteronomy 10:12). If you fear someone you may or may not love them, but you will always obey them. If you both fear and love someone, obedience is the instinctive response. This was Solomon’s summary to his final book: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man,” (Eccl 12:13).

This is precisely why Proverbs 1:7 became the choral refrain of the Bible’s Wisdom Literature: Job 28:28, “The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.” Psalm 111:10, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding.” Proverbs 9:10, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” Proverbs 15:33, “Wisdom’s instruction is to fear the LORD, and humility comes before honor.” If wisdom is the ability to live life well, then its apex is ability to obey God’s commands. This was so central to the Hebrew worldview that fear of God became the hallmark of the faithful Israelite (Acts 13:16, 26; 2 Cor 5:11). Conversely, not fearing God was the mark of a pagan (Psa 36:1 cited in Rom 3:18). Fear of God is not just what we do, it is who we are.

The advantage of fearing God

The command to fear God is not likely the most endearing principle of the Bible. However, it offers great gains for the believer. (1) Those who fear God become God’s friends. “The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him,” (Psa 25:14). The Hebrew word here for “friendship” is literally “secret counsel.” When you fear Him, he lets you into his inner circle. He reveals secrets to you that are hidden from the world. (2) Fearing God makes you fearless. The Bible hosts hundreds of verses about fear. One of the golden threads of this theme is that God’s people are told to fear two things and only two things: God and nothing. “You shall not fear

them, for it is the LORD your God who fights for you” (Deuteronomy 3:22). Over and over we are encouraged to be fearless. Why? Because once you fear God there is nothing left to fear—neither darkness nor damnation, enemies nor tragedies, demons nor dangers. (3) Along with the fear of the Father comes the comfort of the Spirit: “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the **fear** of the Lord and in the **comfort** of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied,” (Acts 9:31). (4) Fear fosters holiness. “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God,” (2 Cor 7:1; see also Deut 13:14; 1 Sam 12:14). How does this work? When we fear we hear (Deut 31:12-13; Psa 66:16; Jer 36:16). Hearing God’s word fosters following his paths (Deut 5:29; 6:2; 8:6; 10:12; 13:4; 2 Chron 6:31; Neh 5:9; Psa 86:11; 119:63; 128:1; Prov 14:2 Eccl 12:13). Thus, a healthy respect for God leads to a healthy life: “The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short” (Proverbs 10:27). Or again, “The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death,” (Prov 14:27; see Prov 19:23; Ecc 8:12-13). (5) Finally, fearing God and praising God go hand in hand (Psa 22:23, 25; 40:3; Rev 19:5). Fear turns to reverence and reverence to awe, and awe to adoration. Our praise rises to its heights not merely by love, but by honor rightly rooted in fear of God’s power, majesty, and omnipotence.

Psalm 34:7–9:

- 7 The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
- 8 Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!
- 9 Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints,
for those who fear him have no lack!

Key Points:

- Wisdom is the practical ability to succeed at life.
- Fear of the Lord is like respect for fathers and rulers—it is not antithetical to love.
- Fear of the Lord leads to following his commands that leads to success in life.

Action Step: James 1:5, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”

Further Resources: