

# WISDOM & THE FEAR OF GOD IN PROVERBS<sup>1</sup>

## WISDOM

### Biblical Wisdom in General

“From a Biblical standpoint, it does not seem difficult to be wise. **Wisdom starts with simply recognizing who God really is and what He really does.** The Bible gives us this information. **Then it is necessary to recognize one’s own nature,** and the Bible provides that data also. This process is as simple and as difficult as having **faith.** Biblical faith will lead a person not only to **fear** displeasing God, but also to put his complete **trust** in Him.”<sup>2</sup>

“**Wisdom in Scripture has a fundamentally different orientation from the English concept.** It is intensely practical whereas the English idea is mostly mental. The English word means things like ‘the power of discernment,’ ‘a high degree of knowledge,’ ‘prudence,’ ‘sagacity,’ ‘understanding,’ ‘discretion,’ and insight.’ These qualities are essentially intellectual. The biblical concept often includes these things, but is **fundamentally pragmatic or utilitarian.** For example, **craftsmen and artisan are described as wise.** Moses spoke ‘unto all that are wise hearted, whom [the Lord] filled with the spirit of wisdom, that they may make Aaron’s garments’ (Exodus 28:3). God chose ‘Bezaleel... [and] filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass’ (Exodus 31:3). **In these cases wisdom is mostly manual dexterity and perhaps ingenuity.**”<sup>3</sup>

“The main Hebrew word for wisdom is *chokmah*. Scripture uses it and its synonyms where English writers would use ‘**skill**’ or ‘**ability.**’ Lexicons give for *chokmah* meanings like ‘**technical skill,**’ ‘**aptitude,**’ ‘**experience,**’ and ‘**good sense.**’ Awareness of this practical orientation helps one better understand the thrust of ‘wisdom’ in the Bible. The author of Job wrote: ‘*With the ancient is wisdom; and in length of days understanding*’ (12:12). **The experience of a long life gives one the good sense and skill to deal with the issues of life and reality.** David began as a young man ‘*prudent in matters*’ (1 Samuel 16:18) and later struck people as able to ‘*discern good and bad,*’ being ‘*wise, according to the wisdom of an angel of God*’ (2 Samuel 14:17, 20). He had the skill and insight to deal with issues that confronted him as king. God gave Solomon a very special gift of wisdom, which he soon displayed when dealing with the two harlots both claiming the same child (1 Kings 3:16-28). He cleverly discerned the true mother by their reactions to his supposed order to divide the child...

“These examples illustrate the immediate applicability of Biblical wisdom to real life. They suggest the definition ‘skill in applied knowledge.’ **That is, Scriptural wisdom is the ability to apply what we know to the problems and issues of life.** One man defines it as ‘the art of being successful, of forming the correct plan to gain the desired results.’<sup>4</sup> This ability includes discernment, prudence, sagacity, understanding, discretion, insight, and all the things our English word ‘wisdom’ suggests, but its essence is the practical aspect of common sense and good judgment in living life.”

“**The basic meaning of the Hebrew word translated ‘wisdom’ is ‘skill’ or ‘ability.’ The application of that skill depends on the specific sphere of operation.** The book of Proverbs moves in the sphere of godly ethics and morality. Consequently, **in Proverbs wisdom is the skill to behave properly according to God’s precepts:** the ability to live in a way pleasing to God. This definition has components that are feasible only in the light of and by the application of the gospel. The obvious problem is that man by himself and in his sinful nature does not have the ability to do anything that pleases God. The practical, ethical wisdom of Proverbs is unattainable to

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<sup>1</sup> Compiled by Mike Edwards, Bible Baptist Church, Madison, Ohio. December 14, 2014, reformatted April 2019. Note: All bolding & some italicizing added. -mwe

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Robert Bell, “*The Theology of Proverbs*” in *Focus on Proverbs* (Biblical Viewpoint: Bob Jones University, Vol. XXXIII, No. 2, Nov. 1999), p. 5

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Terry Rude, “*Wisdom in Proverbs*” in *Focus on Proverbs* (Biblical Viewpoint: Bob Jones University, Vol. XXXIII, No. 2, 1999), p. 6

<sup>4</sup> D. A. Hubbard, ‘*Wisdom*’ in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas [Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1980], 3:1650, cited by Rude in *Biblical Viewpoint*, op cit., p. 7

unconverted sinners. The beauty of the gospel is that God does for man and provides for man what he cannot do or provide for himself. The Wisdom of God is the gracious answer to man's inherent inability to please God. Just as Paul said that God's sending His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh was the answer to man's inability to keep the law (Romans 8:3), so Solomon essentially says that God's Wisdom is the answer to man's inability to do anything that pleases God.... **It is only as sinners come to Christ, the Wisdom of God, that they can begin to please God.** Acceptance with God is in union with Christ (Ephesians 1:6). All that there is about Christ that pleases God, God regards as true for those who trust Christ. **That's justification.** The call of Wisdom is, therefore, the call of Christ. It is a gospel invitation... **Living the practical Christian life follows conversion to Christ. Responding to the call of Wisdom, the Messiah, is the first step for living a life that pleases God.**"<sup>5</sup>

### "Wisdom's Value"

**"Actually the whole book of Proverbs exalts wisdom, but especially the first nine chapters, which personify it.** In that section two passages stand out as portraying wisdom's value: 3:13-20 and 8:6-11. The first starts out: *'Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding'* (3:13). 'happy' translates *'asherey.'* Modern versions translate it as 'blessed' or 'well-off.' The great value of wisdom blesses a person and makes him well off, even more than monetary gain. Thus, the passage continues: *'For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold.'* 'Merchandise' and 'gain' are in modern English **'business profit'** and **'yield.'** Wisdom is more profitable than silver, and it yields better than fine gold. In fact, *'She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her'* (v. 15). Rubies were probably more valuable to the ancient Hebrew than to us today. They were likely more rare in ancient Israel than precious metals. **The comparison, then, increases in emphasis and impact from silver to fine gold to rubies.**

"The climax comes at the end of verse 15. If there is anything we might want more than silver, gold, and precious stones; wisdom is more valuable than that too. **This statement affirms categorically the preeminent value of wisdom.** It paves the way for the statement in 4:7 that wisdom is supreme.

"The passage in chapter 3, however, goes on to show **the worth and desirability of wisdom.** It is a source of long life, riches, and honor (v. 16). It leads one to have a pleasant and peaceful life (v. 17). It is like a life-giving tree to those who have it (v. 18). Of course, the analogy of a productive tree meant much more to a rural-oriented society familiar with and cherishing fruit trees, than to most of us today. This comparison would rank with the statements in 14 and 15 about silver, gold, and rubies... **Obviously wisdom's value is maximum and its power is great.**"<sup>6</sup>

"It is interesting that the nouns in these verses vary between *chokmah, tebnah, and da'ath-wisdom, understanding, and knowledge.* In other contexts these words contrast and mean different things. **Here, however, they are all synonyms for 'wisdom.'** The fact is obvious from **2:1-4.** There Solomon commands to turn the ear to wisdom, apply the heart to understanding, and call out to knowledge. He uses all three nouns. In fact, verse 3 repeats understanding: *'And liftest up thy voice for understanding.'* Yet in verse 4-almost unexpectedly-he uses a singular pronoun to refer to them: *'If thou sleekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures...* The use of the singular instead of a plural pronoun is clear evidence that **only once concept is in view. The three nouns are interchangeable synonyms for that concept. Old Testament theologians call it simply 'wisdom.'**"<sup>7</sup>

### "Acquiring Wisdom"

**"In Proverbs the first hint about how to get wisdom appears in 1:7, 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.'**... 'The fear of the Lord' is an important Old Testament concept and has significant dimensions. At this point in our study, however, it is well just to observe that 'fearing Yahweh' is the Old Testament's equivalent

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Michael P. V. Barrett, "The Gospel According to Wisdom" in *Biblical Viewpoint*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 2, 1999, pp. 13-15

<sup>6</sup> Rude, op cit., \pp. 7-8

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 8

to ‘knowing the Lord’ or ‘being saved.’ Those not born again do not have even the beginning of Biblical wisdom. Hence, **it is clear that wisdom comes in a person’s relationship with God. It is not learned at universities. It is spiritual and practical, not intellectual...**

“Personified Wisdom calls out from the streets and at public squares, inviting the simple-minded and scoffer to receive wisdom (1:20-23), but they mostly refuse (vv. 24-25). This leads to their destruction (vv. 26-33). **The observation teaches that humans must turn from their own way and yield to the invitation of wisdom.** Those who will not are described as they who *‘hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord’* (v. 29). There seems to be an obvious parallel here with coming to Christ for salvation...

“**Proverbs chapter 2 presents the most detailed and informative instruction on acquiring wisdom.** Verses 1-3 order the expenditure of human effort in the pursuit of wisdom. **Solomon states four conditions prerequisite to finding wisdom: ‘incline thine ear,’ ‘apply thine heart,’ ‘criest after,’ and ‘liftest up thy voice.’** Then he summarizes and climaxes this conditionality: *‘If thou sleekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures’* (v. 4). To be sure, one must spend much money, time, and effort for any hope of finding silver and treasures. **Likewise, the acquisition of wisdom takes the same kind of cost and effort. It will not come easy.** The implication of Solomon’s instruction probably is that those unwilling to seek wisdom sacrificially will never find it. **There is a good lesson here for modern Christians. We do not like to work hard and sacrifice. Is it any wonder that wisdom seems so rare in our generation?”**<sup>8</sup>

“At this point Solomon surprises us with the apodosis of his conditional statement. **He has urged the sacrificial pursuit of wisdom, but now he says that the quest will lead to things about God.** *‘Then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God’* (v. 5). We conclude that wisdom must be equivalent to ‘the fear of the Lord,’ which must be the same as ‘the knowledge of God.’...

### **But what is ‘THE FEAR OF THE LORD’?**

“**Two aspects must be mentioned:**

**First is reverential awe.** The uses of the word ‘*fear*’ to mean ‘*reverence*’ suggest this aspect. For example, Leviticus 19:30... *‘The fear of the Lord’* certainly involves reverencing and respecting Him as the Sovereign Master of the universe. Dedicated believers hold God in worshipful awe, bowing their hearts before His majesty and excellence. This aspect is probably the best known among Christians these days...

**The second is actual fear.** This aspect is overlooked and even denied by some in modern times. We cannot imagine that God would want believers actually to be afraid of Him, and we prove our case with 1 John 4:18, *‘There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear.’* **Our proof, however, rests on poor exegesis. That fear is not the fear of God.** The verse goes on to say, *‘...because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.’* That fear is connected with punishment. ‘Torment’ translates the Greek word *kolasis*, which means ‘correction,’ ‘punishment,’ ‘penalty.’ Mature love motivates God’s people to obey him, and those who obey do not fear punishment for disobedience...

“**Actually, there is no basis for discounting real fear in ‘the fear of the Lord.’** In fact, when the Israelites were trembling because of the awesomeness of Mt. Sinai’s quaking, burning, and smoking; God said: *‘O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always’* (Deuteronomy 5:29). **God wants His people to fear to disobey Him.** There is a similarity with a child’s fearing to disobey his father because he is afraid of the chastisement. **The ‘real fear’ in the ‘fear of the Lord’ is fear to disobey.**

### **The end result:**

“**Those who seek wisdom will grow into a beautiful reverence for the Heavenly Father that naturally shuns at all cost disobedience to Him.** We may very seldom recognize this dimension of wisdom, but Solomon makes it plain.”

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 9-10

**Wisdom Possibly Personified in Proverbs (1:20-33):**

“Proverbs is a book of wisdom and instruction. Its typically terse statements define the precepts and practices of godly living. But the theology of Proverbs corresponds to the rest of biblical theology: **godly living is the result of grace and not the reason for it.** In other words, to isolate the precepts of Proverbs and to attempt to implement them apart from the gospel is folly. **Or in theological terms, sanctification always follows regeneration and justification; it can never come before them.** A proper use of Proverbs requires a belief in and foundation on the essential truths of the gospel... Repenting and believing are always God’s terms for sinners who receive and believe the gospel... In this text [Prov. 1:20-33] (the author believes), Christ is Wisdom. I am well aware that not all agree with this interpretation and identification of Wisdom. In my... book, *Beginning at Moses*, I offer my reasons for taking Wisdom, particularly in Proverbs 1 and 8, as a messianic title, so I will not develop the details here. Suffice it to say that in the Old Testament the names and titles of God generally and the Messiah specifically are important means whereby God revealed Himself. The Old Testament is a virtual glossary of messianic titles: the Seed, the Servant, the Shepherd, the Branch, Immanuel, and on it goes. It is my contention that Wisdom in this context (1:2-33) is more than simply a personification of a divine perfection; it is rather the title of the promised Messiah Himself (see New Testament parallels in Matthew 23:34; Luke 11:49; I Corinthians 1:24, 30; Colossians 2:3).”<sup>9</sup>

**THE FEAR OF THE LORD:**

“It is a well-known fact that the fear of the LORD is a prominent concept in the book of Proverbs, mentioned 18 times, sometimes as a *verb* and sometimes as a *noun* (1:7, 29; 2:5, 3:7, 8:13, 9:10, 10:27, 14:2, 26, 27; 15:16, 33; 16:6, 19:23, 22:4, 23:17, 24:21, 31:30). Because we are sinners, if we believe God’s threats of punishment, we naturally fear the awful consequences of our transgressions; **thus fear is linked to faith. In fact it is the first step of faith.** Solomon can say, therefore, ‘*The fear of the LORD tendeth to life*’ (19:23a).”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Barrett, op cit., p. 14

<sup>10</sup> Bell, op cit., p. 5