

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

- ² for gaining wisdom and instruction;
for understanding words of insight;
- ³ for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,
doing what is right and just and fair;
- ⁴ for giving prudence to those who are simple,
knowledge and discretion to the young—
- ⁵ let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance—
- ⁶ for understanding proverbs and parables,
the sayings and riddles of the wise.

- ⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

-- Proverbs 1:1-7

When I was younger, I heard quite often that Jesus loves me. This was all fine and dandy, but did I love him back? Like it or not, the Gospels were full of stories about Jesus speaking in anger (righteous anger, I was assured) to those who would stand in his and his Kingdom's way. Though my children's NIV bible had a picture of a smiling Jesus with two kids and a lamb, I thought I knew better. After all, the stories of Jesus were filled with references to him "rebuking" Pharisees, Simon Peter, fig trees, and even the wind and waves.

Now if Jesus was an angry man, God was even worse—Trinitarian theology notwithstanding. In more than one way, it's a miracle that I'm still a Christian, because my impression of God was that he was to be feared. He was the kind of God who would make you sacrifice your own children just because he could. He was the kind of God who would make you leave home, kill off a bunch of strangers, and who blinded people for having the audacity to look straight at him. Not the most welcoming picture of God.

Yet now, the single greatest turn in my understanding of God is that he *isn't* just a God of wrath. The most-repeated commandment in the Bible—and the commandment that every angel says when they meet mortals—is “fear not”. Now the context in which we’re told not to fear varies, but I think part of the reason God keeps repeating it is that he knows we’re not the kind of creatures that normally trust him. We need regular reminders—366, in fact—that God or his messengers aren’t to be feared.

And yet, the whole book of Proverbs stands on this one verse: “*the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.*” Read that again: “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” Not the “love of the LORD”, not the “worship of the LORD”—“the fear of the LORD.” It’s as though everything we hope of God—as being kind, loving, and gracious—gets dashed to pieces.

I’d be disappointed if you walked away today with the impression that you needed to return to an irrational fear of God before you became wise, because what fearing the LORD means is more than just being afraid. Yes, the Hebrew verb “*ra’at*” does mean “fear”, but when it comes to “the fear of the LORD”, we can’t stop with saying “therefore, be afraid.” If anything, being afraid of the LORD is what got us into this mess in the first place. If we had trusted him and not sought our own way, we wouldn’t have been alienated from God and sin wouldn’t have entered Creation.

If anything, you’ll usually catch me saying “fear the LORD less”. If it came down to you feeling lovey-dovey towards God or cowering before him, I’d rather you err on the side of affection. Yet what we need to hear today from this text is that wise living is built on a foundation of healthy fear.

The question you're no doubt asking in the back of your minds is "why bother living wisely?" In order to answer that question, we need to look at what "wisdom" means and how this relates to living well. And by living "well", I don't just mean having oodles of disposable income. There is a quality of life that supersedes a fat bank account and fancy cars—this is the life of the Kingdom of God.

According to Scripture, wisdom is more than just collecting information. It's even more than discerning between truth and falsehood. Outside of Proverbs, the Hebrew word for wisdom "*hokhma*" tends to mean a masterful understanding of something, or a technical or artistic skill. This is what the Bible means when it says that God makes the world in a wise way¹: with great skill and cleverness. The word "*hokhma*" touches on a wide range of meanings: from knowledge to insight to prudence to guidance to resourcefulness to heroic strength. (Hebrew's a round language like that.) Yet within the book of Proverbs, there is a clear link between wisdom and the exercise of righteousness and justice. Therefore wisdom in Proverbs now gets a *moral* meaning. To live wisely and to live well means to live in right-relatedness with God and with each other and to uphold this relationship by the exercise of justice. In other words, living wisely and well means living in love of God and love of our neighbours—pretty much what God had in mind for us all along.

So now that we know we're to live wisely, we need to take a look at where this wisdom is rooted: in the fear of the LORD.

¹ Psalm 104:24, Jer 10:12, 15:15

It won't do to break up the phrase "the fear of the LORD" to explain it. Instead, we need to look at the "fear of the LORD" as a compound idea—a phrase that expresses two main ideas. First, when we read "LORD" in capital letters, we need to remember that we're reading the personal name of God for his covenant people. We're not just reading about any god—we're reading about Yahweh, the Great I AM who reveals himself to Abraham and Moses. When we talk about the "fear of the LORD", we can't say "fear of God" because right away we'd be stepping into an image of God that may or may not be true. We need to hold tight to the idea that Yahweh is our *specific* God with *particular* character and *unique* being. Yahweh is not a god we dream up. He's the revealed God of Israel and of you and I.

This is important because we need to always keep in mind the kind of God we worship. It almost goes without saying that we live in a world with many so-called gods, whether you worship at the altar of Shiva or line up for the annual blowout sale at Coach. We need to be this specific because the revealed God of the Bible has a character like no other. If we simply call him "God" (which we can still do), we run the risk of lumping him into an image that isn't true. Proverbs won't allow us to make this mistake because it's imperative we remember that the wisdom this book promotes is one that is unique to Yahweh. Yahweh's unique wisdom and ways joins up with love of him and of our neighbour.

Second, the "fear of the LORD" is both rational and emotional. What I mean by rational is that there *are* ways of being taught this wisdom and committing it to memory. You *can* break down "wisdom" into small bits that you can recall and think about before consciously applying to your everyday life. And here, it's helpful to revisit the difference between "fear of God" and "fear of the LORD". Wisdom that comes from "fear of God" many times ends up

being a collection of nice sayings that we all can agree on whether you worship Yahweh or not. For example: reduce, reuse, recycle. Or “money can’t buy happiness—but it sure helps.” Or even in a timely way, “*if your team loses the Stanley Cup final, it’s best not to turn cars over and burn them.*” This is the kind of commonsense wisdom that is meant to keep us in line, a diffuse “fear of A god” more than fear of Yahweh himself. In contrast, the “fear of the LORD” feeds into wisdom that says the small, the weak, the despised, the things that are not—these are the ones God loves and favours. Yahweh’s wisdom is not like the world’s wisdom because it often goes against our instincts to only “look out for number one.”

The “fear of the LORD” is also emotional, though. It sounds counterintuitive to fear someone you might love, but what if that someone is also good to the core? This is what’s behind the sentiment that CS Lewis talks about in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. Aslan the Lion (the stand-in for Jesus in the books) is explained by Mr. Beaver as being “dangerous, but good.” Our God is much the same way. Yahweh cannot be quantified, boxed up, or tamed in any way. Unlike idols of stone, God has a will of his own and is not beholden to our whims. How God exercises his authority and power is entirely up to him, not to how long or how loud we pray. Yet if we understand that Yahweh is not out to harm us and that his teeth and claws are meant for enemies of his Kingdom, we learn the delicate balance of God being dangerous *and* good. If we see Yahweh as an evil deity with designs of harming us, his power is a threat. Yet if we understand him as fundamentally good—even if we don’t understand his goodness all the time—his power becomes a strong shield, a redeeming hand, and a promise of his good will to be done.

Even more, if we keep in mind that we have a strong and active God who swears vengeance on those who prey on the weak and poor, we may well start taking God seriously. A big problem with contemporary Christianity is that we sometimes want to cozy up to God like he's the Snuggles fabric softener bear. Yet a God who's so readily accessible in our own minds can sometimes end up being a god that's easy to neglect and ignore. It's a half-step from there to thinking "*Since God is so gracious, so kind, so nice, he won't mind if we do whatever we please.*" No, actually, God *does* mind, and since he *is* God, he is more than worthy of our respect, and yes, even fear. In Yahweh, fear and love, two emotions that seem paradoxical at best, can meet and know their completion.

As we journey through Proverbs together, we need to keep in mind that the fear of the LORD is the foundation of wisdom because everything begins with the fact that Yahweh alone is LORD—and we are not. Whatever kinds of morality and ethics we try to apply in our own lives, there is a Kingdom ethic that has been instituted by its King. And even though it seems slow, this Kingdom is coming, and soon. While living according to our own rule as though we are our own bosses may be fun for a time, we will eventually have to reckon with a consuming fire of a God who loves justice and mercy. Living wisely means rooting ourselves in the wisdom of God who seeks the shalom, the wholeness, of the world he loves. The fear of the LORD isn't just being afraid of a dangerous God, but it is a reminder that the LORD isn't small or weak. Instead, it's an invitation to keep Yahweh alone as a good but dangerous God, and no one else.

- 1.) Is it possible to love someone who is "dangerous"?
- 2.) What does "living wisely" look like?