

Get Smart
Studies in the book of *Proverbs*
The Fear of the Lord

July 17/18, 2010

Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

Get Smart: The Fear of the Lord

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Background Notes

Scriptures: Proverbs 1:1-7; 8:13, 10:27, 19:23; and others.

Introduction

Information surrounds us. Knowledge multiplies constantly. We are inundated with messages telling us how we should live in order to be successful. The sound bites shower us, offering to condense ideas into intellectually edible portions. People want to *know* what's happening *instantly*.

Decision-makers require information, but is data alone enough to guide the process of human thought and choice? From the world of information systems come warnings about *information overload*. Is it possible to know more than we are prepared to process and apply? Can knowledge saturation paralyze effective guidance?

More than 2,400 years ago, a philosopher told his audiences that mere acquaintance with knowledge was insufficient to give them the *truth*. Human belief, opinion and perception need help in sorting through the details and arrive at true knowledge. Beyond bare belief lies something Socrates called *wisdom*. For that, human beings need a higher form of understanding, one that knows the Good and the True. Not everyone was pleased with him for claiming this higher form of knowing. Among his critics were the Sophists who were walking encyclopedias of information, but who preferred the fine art of *persuasion* to the difficult discipline of *proof and argument*. The Sophists wanted to cajole people to their way of thinking and to influence audiences to follow their directions. Changing behavior mattered more than conviction of the truth. As one of their famous thinkers declared: "Man is the measure of all things, of things that are, that they are; and of things that are not, that they are not" (Protagoras, 5th century B.C.E.). During the Renaissance, this idea was given artistic form by Leonardo DaVinci's "Vitruvian Man" (*left*).



The quest for wisdom began with the human beings in the Garden of Eden. Ironically, the desire for wisdom arose during the temptation by the serpent:

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it (Genesis 3:6).

In this case, gaining wisdom was a *desire* prompted by the idea of eating from the Knowledge Tree of Good and Evil. Eventually, to counteract the devastating consequences of home-grown wisdom, God gave His people His own word through the hand of Moses who told them:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶ Observe them 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 4:5-6).

What the serpent offered was an invitation to *instant knowledge* which human beings mistook for wisdom. What God offered through his Word was the sort of wisdom rooted in true understanding.

Knowing the difference between *wisdom* and *knowledge* is crucial. A simple way to think about this distinction might be:

Knowledge is information of which someone is aware. Knowledge is also used to mean the confident understanding of a subject, potentially with the ability to use it for a specific purpose.

Wisdom is the ability to make correct judgments and decisions. It is an intangible quality gained presumably through experience.

The Bible recognizes the supreme role of wisdom in human life. But it reminds us constantly that wisdom is not a human manufacture but a gift from God. Knowledge alone does not communicate *meaning* or *significance*. For those, we require a fresh perspective which comes from the values God gives us. Assigning importance to anything isn't just about *knowing* something. What wisdom brings to the table is a higher vantage point capable of seeing the forest and not just the trees. So-called "big-picture" understanding belongs to the domain of wisdom.

In this new series, we want to explore the biblical concept of *wisdom* looked at through the eyes of the book of *Proverbs*. That book, along with *Job*, *Ecclesiastes*, and *Song of Solomon* comprise the *wisdom literature* of the Hebrew Bible. Each of these books deals with a host of issues faced by human beings and applies God's wisdom to each situation. In addition, wisdom material also appears in the book of *Psalms* (especially, Psalms 1, 19, 37, 73, and 119). The Hebrew word for "wisdom" is *ḥakmāh* (noun), while related forms translate as "wise," and "to be wise." This term appears 102 times in *Proverbs* — almost a third of all Old Testament references. So central is wisdom to the Old Testament, God warns His people about dire consequences for them if they fail to have this quality in their national life (Deuteronomy 32:29).

Among the famous prayers in the Bible is the one offered by King Solomon soon after he began his reign. Although the king might have asked for wealth or power, he chose to petition God for wisdom instead. Commending Solomon for his "wise" request, God assured him that having sought wisdom, the king would receive all else besides (1 Kings 3:5-14). It was *wisdom* which accented the rule of Solomon, although many of his decisions were not very wise. Even non-Israelite rulers, like Hiram the king of Tyre, spoke of David's "wise son" (1 Kings 5:7; 2 Chronicle 2:12). An extensive commentary shows the multi-faceted features of Solomon's wisdom:

²⁹ And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, ³⁰ so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. ³¹ For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. ³² He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. ³³ He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. ³⁴ And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom (1 Kings 4:29-34).

The key assertion is that "God gave Solomon wisdom..." and not that he acquired it on his own. Notice the reference to 3,000 proverbs which, presumably, includes some of the material found in the book we will be studying in this series. Wisdom, in Solomon's case, attracted the attention of other nations, and he was judged to be "wiser" than "all other men." Once again, his reputation rose from God's gift to him and not from native ability or personal achievement alone.

That wisdom must be sought from God finds its way into the New Testament as well. One familiar passage counsels the readers:

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

Such wisdom stands in sharp contrast to worldly wisdom, both in where it comes from and in what it does:

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is

first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace (James 3:13-18).

Setting aside human wisdom, Paul proclaims that Christ Jesus is the embodiment of true wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:17-25; Colossians 2:3). In an extensive discussion of how we come to have God's wisdom in Christ, Paul tells his readers about being "taught" this wisdom by the Holy Spirit through an act of special revelation:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. ⁶ Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"- ¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. ¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ¹⁶ "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:1-16).

This perspective, coming as it does from Paul the Jew, would have been wholly consistent with what the Old Testament taught about wisdom as the *gift of God*. Of course, Paul went beyond the original understanding of this and finally equates wisdom with the *mind of Christ* and the *mind of the Lord*.

The book of *Proverbs* is a collection of wise sayings, tied together by the common thread of God's superior wisdom. The word for "proverb" in Hebrew is *māshāl*, which in turn is based on the verb *māshal*, "to represent, be like." The noun has a range of meaning: "proverb, parable, allegory, byword, taunt, discourse" and occurs nearly 40 times in the Old Testament. What is the purpose of the *māshāl*? It functions as a tool to pry loose the meaning of life's puzzles, and often has recourse to extended comparisons between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Our concept of *analogy* certainly applies but with a deeper meaning. How do we make sense out of the human situation within the universe? More directly, how do we make sense out of our own predicaments, particularly in a world that is complex and at times absurd?

We might think of proverbs as inspired analogies given by God to human beings as *keys* for unlocking the mysteries of life. For example, if we struggle with circumstance *A*, the purpose of the proverbs is to offer us the parallel *B* which bears resemblance to *A* but which is more clearly understood. The comparisons are not always explicit nor mechanically spelled out. They may behave more like *metaphors* than *similes*: implied, rather than stated. Here's a simple parable which works that way:

Better a dry crust with peace than a house full of feasting with strife (Proverbs 17:1).

In this case, beggar's food and a rich man's banquet are the concrete images for shedding light on the relative impact of peace and strife within a household. Notice how the analogy includes a judgment that *A* is better than *B*. This is one of the purposes for proverbs: to help the audience learn how to make good judgments involving the importance of one thing over another. Life is full of such decisions! Only wisdom can help us here.

The word *māshāl* appears in the following places in the book of *Proverbs*: 1:1, 6; 10:1; 25:1; 26:7, 9.

The Structure of *Proverbs*

One source of debate about this book is how it is organized. Not all of the material comes from the hand of Solomon, and some proverbs were evidently incorporated at different times by editors who assembled the

various proverbs. Bruce Waltke, Old Testament scholar, notes that the book has seven sections, “marked by editorial notices at 1:1; 10:1; 22:17; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; and 31:1.”¹ Using these markers, the following outline is possible.

1. Introduction (1-9)
2. Proverbs of Solomon, Part 1 (10:1-22:16)
3. Thirty Sayings of the Wise: Edited by Solomon (22:17-24:22)
4. More Sayings of the Wise (24:23-34)
5. Proverbs of Solomon, Part 2: Edited by Hezekiah’s men (25-29)
6. Sayings of Agur (30)
7. Sayings of King Lemuel (31).

As we can see, *Proverbs* is broader in scope than Solomon’s collections. Even he used material from others, adapting it for his own purposes.

An important editorial component is the *Introduction* (1-9) which consists of three main sub-sections:

- a. Preamble (1:1-7)
- b. Prologue (1:8-8:36)
- c. Epilogue (9).

Central to the theme of the *Introduction* is the idea of “the way” — the translation of the Hebrew word *derek* and in this case meaning “course of life,” “conduct of life,” and “consequences of such conduct.” Take note of the several uses of this word in chapters 1-9: 1:15, 31; 2:8, 12, 20; 3:23; 4:11, 14, 19; 5:8; 6:23; 7:27; 8:2, 13, 20; 9:6, 15. There are 51 occurrences of this word in the whole book. We find the same word used in passages like Psalm 1 where the “way of the righteous” and the “way of the ungodly” stand in sharp contrast with each other. Wisdom *shows us the way* — how we should live, and how we should walk.

We are Not Afraid of the Fear of the Lord

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: ² To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, ³ to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; ⁴ to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth- ⁵ Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, ⁶ to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. ⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction (Proverbs 1:1-7).

Our focus in this week’s study — the first in the series — is on the major claim found in 1:7. The editor of the *Preamble* chose to place this at the end as a way of gathering up the threads of these opening statements. Honoring the order in which he gave us the material, we will start with what leads up to that all important statement: “The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge...”

If the writer of this section had access to a thesaurus, he would probably have used it here! There are numerous terms expressing the idea of wisdom: “wisdom, instruction, understanding, insight, righteousness, justice, equity, prudence, knowledge, learning, and guidance.” They are expressed through a series of phrases suggesting *purpose* — the rationale for communicating the various proverbs found in this collection. If we follow the arrangement of the text, the result is the following table:

¹ Bruce K. Waltke, "Fundamentals for Preaching the Book of Proverbs, Part 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165 January-March (2008): 5.

Verbs of Purpose	Associated Objective Nouns	
To know	Wisdom Instruction	
To understand	Words of insight	
To receive	Training to be skilled in:	Righteousness Justice Equity
To give	Prudence to Knowledge and discretion to	The simple The youth

We detect a progression in the verbs, starting with the act of *knowing*, and then acquiring *understanding*. From these stages, the person *receives* training in practical matters, and then he *gives* those along to others. As the table suggests, the mere possession of facts, ideas, insights, and knowledge is just not sufficient to qualify one as truly wise. Beyond knowing and understanding is the practical *training* which equips a person to competently achieve righteousness, administer justice and maintain equity in the wider social order. These are the foundation principles of God's holy people. Still, the work of wisdom is not complete until what has been *received* is now *given* to others. This process of passing along "prudence, knowledge, and discretion" applies to the "simple and the youth." We can only assume the writer has in mind a master plan for education throughout Israelite society, starting at a very early age.

True wisdom has all of these dimensions. It involves:

1. **To know.** The Hebrew word is the common verb *yāda'* which occurs some 944 times with different shades of meaning. Among them is God's knowing of human beings and their ways, even before birth (Genesis 18:19; Deuteronomy 34:10; Isaiah 48:8; Psalm 1:6; 37:18; Jeremiah 1:5). Human skills, such as hunting, learning, sailing, and playing musical instruments, are described as forms of knowing (Genesis 25:27; Isaiah 29:11-13; 2 Chronicles 8:18; 1 Samuel 16:16). In a different sense, it also means "to distinguish" between things like "good and evil" (Genesis 3:5, 22; 2 Samuel 19:36; Deuteronomy 1:39; Isaiah 7:15). The idea of contemplation or perception can also be intended, and this is a common meaning in the book of *Proverbs* (1:4; 2:6; 5:2). Then there is the deeply personal and intimate connotation, such as sexual intimacy between man and woman (Genesis 4:1; 19:8; Numbers 31:17, 35; Judges 11:39; 21:11; 1 Kings 1:4; 1 Samuel 1:19). Ultimately, human knowledge of God is in view, especially of the One True God whose name is Yahweh (1 Samuel 2:12; 3:7; Exodus 10:2; Isaiah 60:16; Ezekiel 6:7, 10, 13-14; 7:4, 9, 27).

This deeper knowing of God was of special importance to the prophets. As one commentator observes:

Particularly distinctive is the prophetic concept of "knowledge of God" (*da'at 'ēlōhîm*) which is particularly prominent in Hosea (Hos 4:1, 6; Hos 6:6; cf. Prov 2:5). Knowledge of God is derived from those outstanding historical events in which God has evidenced and has revealed himself to chosen individuals such as Abraham and Moses. These revelations are to be taught to others, "Knowledge of God" appears in parallel with "fear of the Lord" (*yir'at YHWH* Isa 11:2; cf. Isa 58:2; Jer 22:16) as a description of true religion. The man who has a right relation with God confesses. him and obeys him. To do justice and righteousness and to judge the cause of the poor and the needy is to know God (Jer 22:15-16). On the other hand where there is no knowledge of God there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing, committing adultery and destruction upon a people (Hos 4:6; cf. Isa 5:13). Knowledge of God is more pleasing to him than sacrifice (Hos 6:6). The prophetic view of the messianic age is of a time in which the knowledge of God covers the earth as water covers the sea (Hab 2:14; cf. Isa 11:9).²

To Know What?

Two distinct objects follow the Hebrew infinitive construct "to know": 1) Wisdom; 2) Instruction. This would suggest that *knowledge*, in the Hebrew sense, is a *capacity* to receive, more than an active agency to produce. We tend to see knowledge as a human production, a kind of manufactured result of applied

² Jack P. Lewis, "yāda'", *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Volume 1. Ed. R. Laird Harris, et. al. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), §848.

reasoning and thought, leading to technology. However, the Hebraic mindset shows an openness to the gifts of God, and places human beings in a position to accept these gifts. Knowledge is an *openness to God, a receptivity to His wisdom and His instruction*. In the idea of *wisdom (ḥakmāh)*, as noted in our introduction, we find the “God’s eye view” of the whole of reality. With this perspective all of the parts make sense. Things like human tragedy, evil, and the like can only be addressed from this point of view. Meaning is possible only from a fixed vantage point. To the ancients, nature itself discloses the deeper wisdom which is universal. Such things as beauty offers hints at this wisdom. But for the Hebrew, the only way to access such wisdom is through God’s own disclosure in an act of *revelation*. Justice, beauty and nature find a coherence through this wisdom.

As Louis Goldberg has noted:

The wisdom of the OT however, is quite distinct from other ancient world views although the format of wisdom literature is similar to that of other cultures. Reflected in OT wisdom is the teaching of a personal God who is holy and just and who expects those who know him to exhibit his character in the many practical affairs of life. This perfect blend of the revealed will of a holy God with the practical human experiences of life is also distinct from the speculative wisdom of the Greeks. The ethical dynamic of Greek philosophy lay in the intellect; if a person had perfect knowledge he could live the good life (Plato). Knowledge was virtue. The emphasis of OT Wisdom was that the human will, in the realm of practical matters, was to be subject to divine causes. Therefore, Hebrew wisdom was not theoretical and speculative. It was practical, based on revealed principles of right and wrong, to be lived out in daily life.³

It is this practical element which drives the writer’s use of the word “instruction,” translated from the Hebrew term *mûsār* which frequently has to do with *discipline*, especially through active correction — the kind which results in education. Throughout the Torah, God acted in specific ways in order to shape His people in the ways of holiness. This often required harsh measures in cases of horrific sin or threatening disaster. Because Yahweh had a covenant relationship with Israel, He was obligated to protect Israel not only from their enemies but also from themselves! Bound by this covenant, God could not abandon His people to their own foolishness, but was determined to correct their misdeeds and strengthen their character. The *mûsār* of Yahweh (“the discipline of Yahweh”) had the best interests of Israel at heart (see Deuteronomy 11:2ff). This discipline affirms God’s role as Israel’s parent:

Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you (Deuteronomy 8:5).

On this crucial point, Paul Gilchrist offers the following insights:

In Moses’ covenant hymn we read that Yahweh is referred to as Father (Deut 32:6; cf. Deut 1:31; Isa 1:2) of the covenant people (although Exo 4:22; Deut 1:31 teach the same concept). Hence, the theological basis for an earthly father’s discipline over his son is in the covenant. He bears the image of his covenant Lord, and as such stands in parallel relationship over his children hastening, correcting, instructing, providing—which are expressions of an interpersonal relationship of love. So also the thirty usages in Prov and elsewhere, e.g. Prov 3:11-12 where *mûsār* and *tōkaḥat* “reproof, correction” are said to come from Yahweh “for whom the Lord loves (’āhab) he reproves (*yākaḥ*), even as a father the son in whom he delights.” Hence, discipline gives assurance of sonship, for *mûsār* primarily points to a God-centered way of life, and only secondarily to ethical behavior. Proverbs 1:7 couples it with the “fear of Yahweh,” and Prov 1:8 with *tôrâ* “instruction, teaching.” Hence, also the pricelessness of *mûsār* (Prov 8:10) and the reason why fools despise it (Prov 15:5, 32). Proverbs and other wisdom literature speak of discipline with emphasis on instruction. It is tempting to see that the seemingly disparate notions of correction and instruction converge beautifully only in the covenant.⁴

Therefore, “to know wisdom” has as its goal experiencing the benefits of God’s discipline applied to our lives, as the work of a Father for his children. In turn, this modeling of wisdom should also influence earthly parents in the education of their own children.

³ “*ḥakmāh*,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Volume 1, §647.

⁴ “*yāsar*,” *TWOT*, Volume 1, §877.

2. **To understand.** The underlying Hebrew word is *bîn* which has a range of meaning: “understand, consider, perceive, prudent, or regard.” The distinctive idea is “insight” or “discernment.” Our word “understanding” comes close to what is intended here. Used some 247 times in the Old Testament, *bîn* differs from “to know” (*yāda*). We can “know” in the purely perceptive sense, simply collecting the data of experience without making any significant observations about the data. What understanding brings to the knowing *process* is an act of judgment which grasps the meaning, significance, and importance of what is known.

Once again, Goldberg offers us some direction:

A person can perceive pertinent data with his senses: with his eyes he can discern (Prov 17:24, with his ears he can understand words (Prov 29:19). Understanding can also be said to feel (Psa 58:10) and discernment can even be sensed through taste (Job 6:30).

It is possible to hear without perceiving. Daniel did not understand what he had heard (Dan 12:8). It is said in a derogatory sense that the wicked cannot understand the knowledge he knows (Prov 29:7). Other instances emphasize an attentive observation or consideration: Moses accusingly asked the people to consider diligently the years of experience of all generations (Deut 32:7), and David perceived the destination of the wicked (Psa 73:17).

... Ezra read the word of God in the presence of men, women, and those able to understand, i.e. old enough (Neh 8:3). God can make a person understand his ways (Psa 119:34, 73). His angel came to give understanding to Daniel (Dan 10:14). The participial form refers to a teacher, i.e. one who gives discernment to his students (Ezra 8:16).

From a number of instances, insight or moral understanding is a gift from God (Dan 2:21) and it not the fruit of empiricism. It is ethical discernment. A person prays for it (Psa 119:34) and since this insight is uniquely God's, he can reveal or conceal it (Isa 29:14). The seat of insight is the heart and it is the heart which discerns (or fails to discern) the works of the Lord (Psa 28:5), the fear of the Lord (Prov 2:5), righteousness and justice (Prov 2:9), and his will as his word is obeyed (Psa 111:10).

While understanding is a gift of God, it does not come automatically. The possession of it requires a persistent diligence. It is more than IQ; it connotes character. One is at fault if he doesn't have it and in fact, not to pursue it will incur God's punishment (Prov 2:1ff; Ruth 1:21ff). When one acts on the objective presentations of God's revelation, he will attain the ideal of the significance of understanding.⁵

3. **To receive.** The stated object of this simple verb is a word we have already met: *mûsar*, the concept of discipline or training. What the writer does now is to become more specific about the nature of the training. What are the *disciplines* sought through this divine curriculum? The text identifies three in particular, and they carry us beyond personal and private ethics into the arena of social morality. God wants not only holy individuals, He also wants a holy *people*. Unless wisdom soaks into the body politic, shaping matters of 1) righteousness, 2) justice, and 3) equity, its work is only half-finished. Recall one of our introductory Scriptures: God wanted the nations to look at *Israel* and say of *Israel*: “Surely this great *nation* is a *wise* and *understanding* people” (Deuteronomy 4:6, emphasis ours). The particular discipline is described in the Hebrew as involving “skill.” The Hebrew root for this verb form is *śākal* which stresses the idea of being successful at what one does. That is, the kind of “sense” possessed by a person with this quality is practical, useful, and effective. Coincidentally, the Hebrew root looks a great deal like our English word “skill” and may have an ancient linguistic connection to it. Put simply, God's wisdom is intended to make human beings “good at” such things as righteousness, justice, and equity.

Now a few comments about the “social skills” which the writer has in mind.

- 1) **Righteousness:** Hebrew, *tsedeq*. The emphasis is on what is right, just, or normal. More primitively, the word has to do with what is “straight” as opposed to what is crooked. This is a huge

⁵ “*bîn*,” *TWOT*, Volume 1, §239.

concept in the Old Testament, and is among the distinctive ideas found there.⁶ It signifies the standard by which God maintains His world, the norm used to judge everything else. All creation must follow this persistent rule of God, for the world was established in righteousness and is presently ruled by righteousness. What science impersonally calls the “laws of nature,” the Old Testament triumphantly declares is the personal handiwork of God. *Tsedek* is firm, straight, steady and immovable. Righteousness is not an abstraction, but something which constantly happens in God’s world, for He is always at work *making things right* when they have gone horribly wrong. Of special concern to God is when weaker, less fortunate human beings have fallen at the hands of unrighteous persons or events. In such cases, He takes up the *cause* of those in such peril so that He might restore them to their *rightful place* in the world (see 1 Samuel 2:8). Care for the poor, widows, sick, disadvantaged, and grieving belongs to the mission of righteousness.

- 2) **Justice.** The Hebrew word is *mišpāt*, based on the verb root *šāpat* which has to do with the processes of government as understood by the ancients. We can identify the following features of justice: 1) to act as a ruler; 2) to decide cases of controversy; 3) to execute decisions. Applied to ordinary rulers, the verb ultimately finds its supreme expression in God Himself. The meaning is not limited to just judicial activities but to all functions of good government, inasmuch as it comes under the sovereign rule of God’s wisdom. From the statutes of law, to the decisions of a judge and the executions of decrees, justice encompasses all of these. Rulers require wisdom to make judgments (i.e. decisions) affecting the well-being of their people (see 1 Kings 3:11). True justice is rooted in the character of God: “For Yahweh loves justice; he will not forsake his saints (Psalm 37:28).” At the same time, God requires justice of His people (Micah 6:8) and of His rulers (Micah 3:1; Proverbs 29:4). Justice was worn as a breastplate by the High Priest who stood before Yahweh on behalf of all Israel (Exodus 28:15, 29-30).
- 3) **Equity.** We have the noun form, *mēyšar*, but the real meaning comes from the verb *yāšar*. It has three distinct meanings: 1) to go straight or direct in the way; 2) to be or live uprightly; 3) to be right in someone’s eyes: ours, others or God. For a ruler to walk straight in matters of governance meant the fair application of law to those he judged. We would say, “be a straight shooter,” or “give it to me straight,” or “straight talk.” Other similar ways of speaking include, “level the playing field,” derived from using the Hebrew word for smoothing out rough roads. Consistency in following the law is an essential feature of good government. Refusing to show favoritism toward persons because of wealth or other personal advantage is a mark of this quality. Wisdom teaches human beings to give each their due and not show favoritism.
4. **To give.** This action is directed to the simple and the youth. The first word, “simple,” is actually the Hebrew word *petî* which occurs some 27 times in the Old Testament. The key idea is “open, spacious, wide.” It has both positive and negative connotations. Favorably, a person who is open-minded is willing to consider new ideas even if they conflict with present belief. From a divine perspective, this means that God can find ready hearts for His wisdom. However, the negative aspect of openness is gullibility, naiveté, and simple-mindedness. Such a person becomes victim to enticement, deception, and foolishness. Immaturity breeds bad judgment and yielding to temptation. Wisdom is the only antidote. The second word, “youth,” refers to those who are yet in the early stages of life (*na’ar*) and prime candidates to shape with good education. To both groups, the writer directs three features of wisdom. 1) **prudence** (*’armāh*), the positive version of craftiness and guile. Jesus preserved this notion in his saying, “Be wise as serpents” (Matthew 10:16). There is a *craft* to living which includes an understanding of how things work, and how to interact with them. The simple and the young must be properly appraised of such things so that they will not be caught off-guard. 2) **knowledge** (*da’at*). See our comments above on “to know” (*yāda’*). 3) **discretion** (*m^ezimmah*), refers to having purposes and plans, and then carrying them out or putting them into effect. Again, there is both a negative and positive sense in which this word is used. On the one hand, we read about evil plots concocted by the wicked against the righteous or unsuspecting. Positively, we hear

⁶ An excellent and concise treatment of this idea is found in Norman H. Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 51-78.

about God's plans for the good of His people. Applied to the simple and the young, the idea of discretion comes into play: knowing how to speak and act, and under what circumstances. Appropriateness lies at the center of this form of wisdom.

Having set out these four main actions (know, understand, receive, and give) associated with the experience of wisdom, the writer throws down a challenge to one specific group: "the wise" (1:5). We might expect the "simple and the youth" to be the special objects of the proverbs and their wisdom, but aren't the wise already fully equipped in this regard? That question stimulates a closer look at the nature of wisdom. Human beings don't acquire wisdom in the same sense that they become owners of a piece of property. The wise are those who: 1) hear; 2) increase in learning; 3) obtain guidance. That is, to be wise involves an attitude, not only an aptitude. It requires openness to fresh insight from God by listening for His voice and growing in the knowledge of His word. Wisdom is not a static condition but instead a dynamic relation.

In practical terms, the writer directs the attention of his readers to four literary forms which act as containers for communicating divine wisdom: 1) a proverb; 2) a saying; 3) words of the wise; 4) riddles. He groups them together: a) a proverb and a saying; b) the words of the wise and their riddles. He applies the verb *bin* to all of these features of wisdom: he invites the wise to understand (gain insight) into all of them. That is a daunting challenge. What sort of wisdom is this which extends its reach in so many directions? If a person spent her whole life grappling with the manifold character of wisdom, could she ever expect to truly become wise? Would she not, with Job, cry out: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (Job 42:3)?

By design, the editor of *Proverbs* has brought his audience to this point so that he might offer the quintessential basis for all wisdom. It is as if he held back the key until now, and with literary flourish he offers the heart of wisdom in 1:7. "The fear of Yahweh" is both a revealing and yet mysterious phrase. In the Hebrew language we read *yirat Yahweh*. What sort of "fear" is this? Throughout Scripture, not only in *Proverbs* (9:10; 15:33), we find this stunning claim (see also Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10).

Yet fear as a pathway to wise living and proper relationship with God seems to us both unattractive and mysterious. After all, we fear "whatever we feel has great power of destroying us, or of harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain," Aristotle once wrote. How can fear of God be central to the life of faith, which is meant to draw us closer to God in love? In Scripture we see the great paradox that the covenant begun with Abraham and fulfilled in Christ simultaneously casts out and encourages fear. For those who love God fully, there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Yet even Abraham, who in his faithfulness is "the father of all" believers (Romans 4:16), is commended for maturing into proper fear of God (Genesis 22:12). With this in mind, we must avoid the temptation to think that fearing God is just a primitive form of piety or a symptom of immature faith.

In Scripture we find implicit distinctions among three types of fear that play very different roles:

1. **Worldly fear can diminish human life.** This shrinking anxiety about the future comes from realizing we can be destroyed by human sinfulness, powerful institutions, and natural processes beyond our control. But worldly fear too often debilitates, paralyzes, and undermines trust, and the kind of justice that emerges out of trembling anxiety is outward and unstable. For these reasons, worldly fear has no lasting place in God's kingdom, and is hardly a source for wisdom.
2. **Spiritual fear of God's judgment directs us away from sin and toward righteousness.** We should grieve over our sins. If we tremble at the thought of sin's judgment (see Mark 13:32-37), we can better avoid transgression. In this way, a fear of divine punishment teaches us.
3. **A lasting, heavenly fear honors God's holiness and love.** We rightly experience a shrinking, repentant awe in the presence of the transcendent God. As we die to our sinful selves, our fear is less concerned with punishment and more concerned with purification. The enormous difference between God and His creatures explains the kind of fear that is consistent with a love that draws us ever nearer.

The phrase, “fear of the Lord,” occurs at least 18 times in *Proverbs* (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). Examining each of these texts, Wiersbe offers this concise summary:

If we truly “fear the LORD,” we acknowledge from our hearts that He’s the Creator, we’re the creatures; He’s the Father, we’re His children; He’s the Master, we’re the servants. It means to respect God for who He is, to listen carefully to what He says, and to obey His Word, knowing that our disobedience displeases Him, breaks our fellowship with Him, and invites His chastening. It’s not the servile fear of a slave before the master but the reverential and respectful fear of the child before the parent. Children fear not only because their parents can hurt them, but also because *they can hurt their parents*. Proverbs 13:13 admonishes us to fear God’s commandments, which suggests that the way we treat our Bible is the way we treat God.⁷

In the presence of God, we stand before what theologians call the *numinous*. Rudolph Otto gave clarity to this concept in his work, *The Idea of the Holy* (1923). He explained that the power and presence of God are about two different kinds of *mystery*. 1) There is *mysterium tremendum*, which evokes “fear and trembling,” and 2) *mysterium fascinans*, draws, attracts, and fascinates. These experiences are personal and place a person in communion with God *the wholly other*.

The Torah says that God *asks us to fear Him*:

¹²And 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, ¹³ and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good? (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

No contradiction exists in this passage between “fear” and “love” in our relationship with God, since the passage includes both within the same requirement!

From this text we discover that the fear of the Lord is actually another way of talking about *commitment to God*. Wisdom isn’t given *on demand*. Something is required from us in order for wisdom to begin for us. The sort of knowledge which comes from God places demands on our lives: it isn’t just a collection of facts or a wealth of information. We acquire wisdom, not so that we can claim to be wise, but so that we might live a life which pleases God and which benefits His good creation. Wisdom is not a possession; it’s a privilege. Wisdom is not an achievement; it’s an admonition.

To say that the “fear of Yahweh” is the *beginning* of wisdom, means that it stands at the very root of things. The writer uses the Hebrew word *rē’šīt*, a term found in Genesis 1:1, announcing the original creation of the world: “in the beginning, God...” There is no getting *behind* the beginning: it is the absolute starting place for all things having to do with wisdom. There is no getting behind the fear of the Lord, for that is the absolute premise for everything we can possibly know. Philosophers often talk about first principles: the fear of the Lord is the first principle for wisdom.

Another way of understanding “the fear of the Lord,” is to see it as a form of *acknowledgement*. What does it mean to acknowledge God? We find a reasonably clear statement in 3:5-7:

⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. ⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD.

It means:

1. Trust in the Lord with all your heart.
2. Do not lean on your own understanding.
3. In all your ways acknowledge him.
4. Be not wise in your own eyes.

⁷ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Skillful* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1995), 24.

Notice how each of these actions gives first place to God and last place to self. Unconditional trust takes God into consideration first when making decisions, living one's life, or believing anything. Then when the writer concludes his thoughts, he essentially says, "What I mean to say by all of this is simply, 'Fear the Lord.'"

The book of *Proverbs* gives us evidences for knowing that we have a proper fear of the Lord.

1. According to 8:13, "The fear of the Lord is to *hate evil*." Those who don't want to do what God says will manufacture every sort of excuse for not putting full trust in Him. Not all acts of unbelief are for intellectual reasons. Many people choose not to believe in God because to do so would have moral implications in their lives. They might actually need to change the way they live, and they resist such a suggestion. Rather than "hating evil," they *love evil* instead. Such persons show a manifest resistance to the fear of the Lord.
2. "The fear of the Lord adds length to life," says the writer in 10:27. There is good reason for this. Those who fear the Lord look at life in light of eternity — that is, they are not just interested in short-term solutions or quick-fixes, but care about the long-haul. Life for them is a race, and it needs to be run until the goal is reached. Endurance depends on believing that in long-run what we do in this life actually matters for eternity. What we have in this proverb is not just a favorable entry in an actuarial table, but a commentary on the coherence of life looked at from beginning to end. Here is true wisdom and a proper fear of the Lord.
3. "The fear of the Lord leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble" (19:23). This is a somewhat more problematic statement. At first reading, it appears that the proverb promises freedom from trouble as a result of the fear of the Lord. The Hebrew is helpful here. The word translated "untouched" is the Hebrew verb *pāqad*, which has the common meanings "reckon, count, number, appoint, muster." These terms have a calculated finality about them. We might translate 19:23 as "Then one rests content, not having been permanently counted among those who have trouble." That is, they are not condemned to trouble, even though they might experience it.

When the prophet Isaiah spoke to a troubled nation on the brink of disaster, he spoke these words, reminding his audience about the supreme wisdom of God:

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Concluding Thoughts

Technically, there is a difference between being *smart* and being *wise*, especially when IQ is primarily in view. Still, even in our culture, we recognize something called "street smarts," which has little to do with formal education and everything to do with common sense, though of a very edgy kind. When the biblical writers speak of wisdom, *hākāmāh*, they are clearly concerned with something that is applicable to human life, and not just spouting quaint sayings or abstract ideas. The Hebrew writers had confidence that the world at its deepest level was invested with meaning, and that human beings, clothed with wisdom from God, could discover that meaning and then guide their lives by it.

Post-moderns do not have such confidence. They see the world in fragmented and anecdotal ways, composed of their own private stories through which they attempt to make sense out life in the here and now. They have abandoned all hope of a bigger story which might possibly connect all private stories together. If there is meaning in the world, it is what human beings make out of it and nothing more. All wisdom is transitory and lacks validity beyond the moment.

To such persons, *Proverbs* proposes a way forward which calls them back to the ancient past. This ancient wisdom dares to suggest that God is the beginning of all things, and that in the full acknowledgement of Him, human beings can at last find guidance for life now and in the future. Appealing to the post-moderns ought to be the concise form of the proverbs themselves, marked by short, pithy sayings energized with powerful

wisdom. These are not highly technical, complex, or abstract propositions which belong to systematic theology. Instead, like a thousand tiny lenses which glimpse into the immense wisdom of God, they focus truth for the practical benefit of the reader.

So often our lives can feel aimless, as we rush from one situation to another, from one technique to another in hopes of finding something that will give our lives purpose and meaning. In the 50's it was the power of positive thinking, in the 60's it was astrology, the Age of Aquarius - in the 70's it was TM, Transcendental Meditation - in the 80's it was sensory isolation tanks - in the 90's it was technology, computers and the Internet - all promising to help us achieve the fulfillment that we desperately desire. But none of them is our center, none of them is our calm in the storms of life, none of them is our peace, the peace that surpasses all understanding. God is our source for all that and Scripture is the testimony, Scripture is the witness to that God, Scripture is the way in, Scripture embodies the wisdom of God. We can and do know God in nature, in relationships, in worship, in service - but Scripture not only tells the story, its wisdom invites us into the story so that we become part of the story.

When we are stuck with a problem that we have to face, when we are up against an obstacle that looms over me, when we are at our wit's end, we usually do not gravitate to the smartest people, but to the wisest. For wise people rarely tell us what to do, but rather remind us who we are - and even more importantly, they remind us Whose we are. Put another way, they help us reenter to the story of Scripture from which we have fallen away, but to which we are inextricably linked.

“God calls us to receive His wisdom and be skillful, so that we can make a life that will glorify Him. The important thing isn't how long we live but how we live, not the length but the depth of life. Fools wade in the shallows, but wise people launch out into the deep and let God give them His very best.”⁸

Glory to God! Amen.

⁸ Wiersbe, *op. cit.*, 28.

Digger Deeper: *Get Smart: The Fear of the Lord*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *Get Smart: The Fear of the Lord* carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. What do the following Old Testament texts teach us about “wisdom,” both the false and the genuine? (Genesis 3:6; Deuteronomy 4:5-6).
2. In what ways did Solomon exemplify wisdom? (1 Kings 3:5-14; 4:29-34).
3. What special features does wisdom have from the standpoint of the New Testament and the Gospel? (James 1:5; 3:13-18; 1 Corinthians 1:17-25; 2:1-16; Colossians 2:3).
4. Briefly scan through the book of *Proverbs*, noting and labeling the following sections: 1:1-9:18; 10:1-22:16; 22:17-24:22; 24:23-34; 25:1-29:27; 30:1-33; 31:1-31.
5. According to *Proverbs*, wisdom should guide the “way” we live our lives. Using the following passages, discuss the “way of wisdom” and its opposite, the “way of folly” (1:15, 31; 2:8, 12, 20; 3:23; 4:11, 14, 19; 5:8; 6:23; 7:27; 8:2, 13, 20; 9:6, 15).
6. Our main text this week is Proverbs 1:1-7. Read through it, and then list the purposes the writer gives for using proverbs. What does the passage tell us about the meaning of “wisdom”?
7. At this juncture in our study, offer a definition of “wisdom,” including what is it, how we acquire it, why we need it, where we can apply it, and who gives it to us.
8. What is the relationship between wisdom and knowledge?
9. In Proverbs 1:3, what three skills does wisdom cultivate in us? Where are they most applicable?
10. The phrase, “fear of the Lord,” appears in Proverbs 1:7 where it is called “the beginning of wisdom”? Suggest some possible meanings for the full statement.
11. What does Deuteronomy 10:12-13 tell us about “the fear of the Lord”? Compare Proverbs 3:5-6 and comment on the connection between “fearing the Lord” and “acknowledging him.” What does the phrase *not* mean, and how can it be misunderstood?
12. Study the eighteen occurrences of the phrase and then further expand your understanding of its meaning (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).