



## The Beginning of Wisdom

Proverbs 1:1-33

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When I was a child, as many children are, I was afraid of loud noises. They made me feel uncomfortable, out of control. I remember going to an air show once and screaming the whole time because the jets flying overhead were too loud. And I remember getting scared in storms, anticipating the loudness of thunder. My wife will still tell you today that I get far too jumpy far too easily whenever she drops something heavy or makes some sort of loud noise.

Thunder, however, doesn't scare me anymore. And it's not because I have mentally ascended in my understanding of electric currents, and I know that my home will keep me safe or that my chances of being struck are a certain percentage. Thunder doesn't scare me anymore, because my fear of thunder has been replaced by an awe and wonder at the God who speaks in the thunder. And I don't mean Thor. What I mean is that when we learn to stand in trembling awe of God, the whole world changes. The 19th century Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon expressed this too:

God's thunder is my delight... I always feel ashamed to keep indoors when the thunder shakes the solid earth, and the lightning flash like arrows from the sky. Then God is abroad, and I love to walk out in some wide space, and to look up and mark the opening gates of heaven, as the lightning reveals far beyond, and enables me to gaze into the unseen. I like to hear my Heavenly Father's voice in the thunder.<sup>1</sup>

What is it that changes fear of the natural world—fear of death, fear of disaster, fear of disease—into opportunity for worship? What is it that can shape our bland and boring world into a world full of wonder? What is it that reorders our loves and our desires, guides our steps and our decisions, intercepts our emotions and relationships? What is it that changes the Thunder into Revelation? The book of Proverbs tells us that it's wisdom, because wisdom fears and trembles before the majesty of God.

We will be in Proverbs the rest of the summer, and it's a book all about Wisdom. What is wisdom? Wisdom is sanctification in action, it's the holiness of the will. At other places in the Scripture, wisdom is used synonymously as an artistic skill. It's not philosophy, it's not "street smarts". For our purposes in the book of Proverbs, let's define wisdom as **the learned skill of seeing God and the world rightly**. And today, in Proverbs 1, we are introduced to Wisdom. And we learn that the

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<sup>1</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*.



foundation of wisdom, the ABC's of living wisely, is fear. To become wise, the first step is to fear God. So let's go first to examine the fear of the Lord as the beginning of Wisdom, and then the rest of chapter 1 will show us a test case of fearing God rightly.

## To Become Wise, You Must First Tremble (1-7)

The book of Proverbs is split into what is essentially two sections. In Chapters 1-9, we find a set of "lectures" or "poems" which personify Wisdom and are comparing wisdom to foolishness. They act as the introduction to the Proverbs, and the picture is of a Father giving instruction to his son, which we find in verse 8-9. Chapter 1-9 are addressed to this Son. He is not to forget or forsake this foundational teaching, not because it is utilitarian, but look again at 8-9. This instruction, this wisdom, is *beautiful*. If he adorns himself with the wisdom here, he will not be hardened and aloof, but soft and inviting—attractive, full of grace.

After the introductory lectures of chapters 1-9, we get to the actual Proverbs themselves. While 1-9 can be read as a literary whole, chapter 10-30 are much more disjointed. This is what we usually think of when we think of Proverbs: these short, quippy, statements. One author says reading Proverbs is like turning a prism in the light: each time you turn it, you are revealing the nature of life. The proverbs themselves are not specific to certain times or cultures, but rather about life itself—about repeatable circumstances. Most of the Proverbs are centered on everyday circumstances, speaking on topics such as money, friendship, choices, work, emotions, family, and the tongue. So for our time in Proverbs, we will spend most of our teaching in Chapters 1-9, so that you can get a sense of how to read the Proverbs and what you are getting yourself into. Then we will have a few weeks where we will choose specific Proverbs or a set of Proverbs to unpack on a specific theme. But the goal is that by the end of this sermon series, you will be able to understand and apply the Proverbs yourself, which is why we are spending the majority of our time in the introduction in chapters 1-9.

The tagline for our time in Proverbs is simple: *Good News for Fools*. I wanted to call the sermon series *Good News For Idiots*, but when I ran it by some people they thought it was a little harsh. I think you'll get the point though—as we go through Proverbs, there we will be plenty of times where you feel convicted of your own foolishness and idiotic actions. But that's a good place to be, because ultimately, Proverbs are gospel: they are good news. I want to show you why, so let's start with the Author in **verse 1**.

These Proverbs are written by Solomon, son of David, king of Israel. So what? Let's not miss this significance. Many of us approach Proverbs as if it is simply a compilation of earthly sayings. Helpful, but really could have been written by any non-Christian philosopher in the Eastern world. The proverbs are just a nice Christianized version of Confucius, or something like that. But here, the authorship of Solomon means that these Proverbs are placed squarely in the flow of redemptive history. Notice how Solomon defines himself: Son of David, the King. From the very



beginning, we are pointed to the reality that this is a kingly Book, in the line or tradition of David, God's anointed one.

After just spending 20 something weeks in 1 Samuel, we should be able to notice what God is doing here. This is his scripture—he is using the Davidic king Solomon by the Spirit to give us wisdom that ultimately will point us to the wisdom of the new Davidic King Jesus. And here we have the proverbs of the King. The Hebrew word for proverb is related to the verb that means “represent, to be like”. So what are Biblical proverbs? They are the words of the divine king, meant to act for us as representations of reality. Again, wisdom is the **learned skill of seeing God and the world rightly**. Proverbs are pictures of that wisdom—or as **verse 6** says, the words of the wise and their riddles. You remember in Math class how we had to solve word problems? Think of Proverbs as word problems that set up equations > But not mathematical equations, wisdom equations.

What is the purpose of the Proverbs? Well we see it here in **verse 2-4**. It's linked both to *knowledge* and *understanding*, but also to wise *action*. The book of Proverbs is intended to make us a people who understand the wisdom of God when we hear it, to be able to receive it and not reject it, and to let it lead us to wise action. You see the action there in verse 4, prudence is not just cautionness or being risk averse, it's also translated as “shrewdness” and being able to discern, to have discretion. Notice too that the Proverbs are not just a means to get wisdom and then be done with it, they are also a means to continue in wisdom, which we see in **verse 5**. Not only do the Proverbs help us open our eyes to Godly wisdom, but wisdom is actually required in order to understand them! In other words, you can't approach Wisdom with a strictly critical eye and try to wrestle out knowledge and truth. We must approach the wisdom of God with humility, understanding that we are foolish, we are simple, we are the youth, the sons and daughters who need guidance. And in order to even *get* guidance, we have to have enough wisdom to realize we are not wise! C.S. Lewis says it like this:

As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.<sup>2</sup>

Again, this is so important. In the next few weeks, the text will be showing us two paths: wisdom and folly. How will we know we are following the right path? It all depends on how we are approaching God's wisdom. Are we seeing it as advice we may or may not follow, or are we seeing God's wisdom, revealed in this book, as the only pathway to life? We don't get wise and then get God, we need God to get wisdom. This is what **verse 7** really means. You can say that verse 7 summarizes the entire book of Proverbs. We need God in order to get wisdom. What is essential to wisdom is to *fear* God and not to despise his instruction.

What does it mean to *fear* God? I have been helped by my study of this small book by Michael Reeves, called *Rejoice and Tremble*. In his book, he argues from a study of the puritans and the

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*



reformers that a Biblical fear of God is not to be afraid of God. Neither is it primarily a recognition of his wrath or his power, although that plays a part. Instead, a right fear of God is a trembling awe at his character, and ultimately, at his love. Right fear of God does not fear God as judge, but stands before him as Father. Anyone can fear God as creator—anyone can look and see and be afraid of his judgement and his wrath—but only those in Christ can fear God as Redeemer. That is true, right, fear of God: being overwhelmed by his goodness, that someone so unlike us and so holy and majestic would choose to redeem us in Christ by the Spirit. The knowledge of God as redeemer provokes a deeper and more intense fear, a joyful and mysterious trembling, than simply knowledge of God as creator.

I believe that is the kind of fear we see in our text. The fear of the Lord in **verse 7** comes from heeding instruction, not from running and cowering in fear of judgement. If you are a parent or a teacher, you know that there are two ways a child will listen to what you are teaching them. They can fear what you might do to them if they don't obey, the consequences that might come, and so they listen. But they can also listen to you because you are smarter than them, more experienced than them, wiser than them, stronger than them, in effect, more glorious than them. When they are afraid of you, they might listen for a time, but they will learn far more when they see your goodness, your qualifications, if they are awed by your love for them and for what you are teaching, they will listen. And that is the kind of fear we have before God—when he speaks, we listen. **Verse 8**, the metaphor is of a son heeding his parent's words. Right fear of God does not mean we are slaves trembling before the whip of our master, it means we are sons trembling before the perfect wisdom of our Father.

This doesn't mean, as we will see, that warnings and descriptions of judgement can't become wisdom to us. The Proverbs are full of warnings against folly. But we listen to those warnings not first because we fear judgement, but because God is giving them, and we trust God knows best. That is the fear of God.

Fear of God is a whole-Bible theme. Right now I am also reading a work by Søren Kierkegaard called *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard is a 19th century Danish philosopher, and a Christian. His book *Fear and Trembling* is a discourse on the story of Abraham and Issac, where Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice Issac. And the question of the book is essentially: how does Abraham do it? How does he have that kind of faith? I was struck as the work shows how we mistake Abraham's problem. Kierkegaard says we usually understand the story of Abraham and Issac as: "The great thing was that he loved God so much that he was willing to sacrifice to Him the best." Abraham's story is about giving up what we love for the service of God. In this way, Abraham did what the rich young ruler could not: he was willing to sell his possessions for obedience to God. But actually, this misses the point of the story, says Kierkegaard: "What they leave out of Abraham's history is dread."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*.



In other words, Abraham is not just being asked to give up his best possession. He is being asked to commit murder, to do evil, to watch in horror as his own hands take the promise of God away from him. Abraham's story is not just a story about obeying God and sacrificing for God, it is about overcoming the trembling of tragedy with a trembling fear of God. In order to make it up the mountain to sacrifice Issac, Abraham could not just buckle down and obey. He had to believe. He could not just fear the consequences—because the consequences of obeying, of killing his only son were far worse than disobedience. No, Abraham could not just fear God as creator, he had to tremble before God as redeemer. He had to believe, with fear and trembling. And when he does, what does God say?

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."  
Genesis 22:11-12

That is fear of God. It's believing and trembling before the redemptive plan of God. And that fear, says Proverbs 1:7, is necessary for even an iota of wisdom. This is the instruction of our king, Jesus. And remember, Jesus was the wisest, smartest man who ever lived. And he is teaching us the ABCs of wisdom: To become wise, you must first tremble.

With our time left let's examine the rest of chapter 1 quickly. I want to show you a test case for fearing God. In verses 10-33 we will see a warning against seeking temporary security through greed and violence.

## **Test Case: Is it Wise to Seek Temporary Security Through Violence and Greed? (10-33)**

**Verse 10-19** paint the picture of a group of enticers. They say in verse 11: "let's ambush someone. Let's get violent." Why would they resort to needless violence? The answer is greed, we see in **verse 13-14**. They want to acquire security for themselves, and here is an opportunity in front of you to take part.

We may not be tempted towards senseless violence, but this kind of temptation is incredibly common. We are enticed by greed, a desire to make ourselves secure. And so we don't care if it comes at the cost of others. We would rather have earthly, temporary security. And we all know the people who tempt us that way—who value security over anything else. But look at the wisdom of **verses 17-19**. While it appears that the violent and the greedy are trapping an innocent bystander, they are actually trapping themselves. They set their own abush, they take away their own life. This is proverbs in action: It shows us the foolishness of what first appears to be wisdom. And it tells us: do not be deceived! Don't be tricked in the moment to think that you can find temporary security through violence and greed—you will find yourself in a trap you cannot escape.



The thing with Proverbs is that it is easy to say, but it is hard to do. When this temptation comes our way, how are we to be wise? Well, It's not as if wisdom is hiding from us. Look at verse **20-21**, she cries aloud in the street, raising her voice. God is speaking to us in the gospel, showing us the foolishness of failing to listen to him and seeking our own security. So the lament of wisdom is not that no one has sought her out to get her advice, it's that no one listens as she shouts it, **verse 22**.

What happens next, then, is the lament. Wisdom is crying out, and no one listens. But the storm is coming. **Verse 26**, wisdom laughs at the calamity of fools, mocks when terror strikes. This does not mean to imply that God takes joy at the destruction of sinners. Wisdom here is personified as a comparison against foolishness. When the destruction of the foolish comes, it will be so clear how silly and foolish sin is that it will be like wisdom is laughing. It will be so clear that greed is not security that it will be hard not to laugh at how foolish greed and violence are! Our sin may appear enticing now, but one day all will see just how idiotic we are for falling prey to it.

And it's not as if God in his wisdom needs to punish those who fail to listen to him. No, the text is teaching us that failing to listen to God and his wisdom is punishment in and of itself! **Verses 28-31** show us this. They shall eat the fruit of their own way, and have their fill of their own devices. What seeking greedy temporary security does is rewards us with emptiness. We have our fill of what we have stored up for ourselves, but our fill is emptiness and worthlessness before God. We cannot accrue any ounce of spiritual goods to take with us into God's new world by means of greed or violence. It reminds me of Luke's sermon last week: one day God's judgement will come, and if all we do is build temporary security for ourselves, we will never achieve eternal security.

And that is exactly what this passage is teaching, all summed up for us in **verse 32-33**. Wisdom is *listening* to God. Whoever listens to God will dwell securely. Notice the fool's complacency destroys them. It's not active, it's passive. It's not just that they do something, it's that they fail to do something. It's not just that they condone violence, it's that they don't listen when God says *don't* condone violence. But what about those who do listen? Their security will be stored in Heaven, and will be eternal security. So here is our test case: Is it wise to seek temporary security through violence and greed? No. What is wise? It is wise to listen to God when sin entices, and trust he is bringing eternal security.

That seems simple, but in order to ever get there, in order to listen to God at all, we need to fear him. Go back to **verse 23**. Wisdom is crying aloud in the street, and lamenting that no one hears. Hearing is the most important piece. And so verse 23, if you turn, I will pour my spirit, and I will make my words known. See, before we can ever hear the words of wisdom, we need the Spirit of God. And here is the good news in this: God has poured out his Spirit on the earth through his anointed one Jesus Christ. He has made his words known to us. Sin is calling out, enticing us with it's words, but we have a better word. We have the word of God in Jesus calling out in the street and pouring out his spirit on the repentant. Is it wise to seek temporary security? No, it is wise to listen to God.



I may not be walking out into the middle of a field in the middle of one, but I no longer fear thunderstorms. If I can, I try to watch them from the porch. Because when I know that the God of the universe, the creator, has become my Redeemer, every thunderstorm is a proverb. It's God speaking, telling me: I am mighty, and I love you. Listen, my son, to what I say. A thunderstorm is wisdom calling in the street. Heed my instruction, don't forsake my teaching. A thunderstorm is an opportunity to fear God, to listen to God, and to be at ease, without dread of disaster.

You remember that time where Jesus is up on the mountain with Peter, James, and John? And suddenly he is transformed and they see him in glorious brightness, the text says his face shone like the sun. Jesus is the Son who perfectly obeyed, the hearer who perfectly listened, the sage who was perfectly full of wisdom, the only man who submitted perfectly to the Fathers will unto death. And so suddenly the Father speaks, and he says: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

To be wise is to listen to Jesus. To obey Jesus. To love Jesus. To follow Jesus. To belong to Jesus. He is wisdom, and when we fear God, we are led to him. He is our eternal security, he is the one who sends the Spirit and reveals the words of God. He is the redeemer, the one through whom and in whom we tremble and experience the majesty of the grace of God.

So friends, let me invite you today to listen and to tremble before the redemption of God. Let me invite you to listen to the message of the cross, where Jesus Christ the Son bled and died to save foolish people, and to tremble in awe. Perhaps, as Mr. and Mrs. Beaver said of Aslan the lion, he is not safe. Those who fail to listen to Jesus will go headfirst into their own destruction and reap what they have sown. No, he won't be mocked, used, belittled, or ignored. He isn't safe—but he is good. Knowing the difference, and trusting his goodness like a listening child ready to be taught: this is the beginning of wisdom.

