

Proverbs 9:10-12

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Solomon is setting the stakes for the two life paths we can follow—wisdom or wickedness. Life or death. At the hinge of his presentation, he returns to one of the cornerstones of the path of wisdom: the fear of God.

The fear of the Lord is used throughout The Book of Proverbs (see notes on Proverbs 1:7 and 2:5) as *the beginning of wisdom* (vs 10). *Fear* requires a certain recognition of power, in large part the power to create consequences. We can get a glimpse into God's view of what it means to *fear* Him by looking at the episode of Israel at Mount Sinai.

There, Israel heard from God and feared greatly. In that instance, they feared losing their physical lives due to being in God's presence. Accordingly, they asked to be removed from hearing God directly and instead have Moses speak to them (Exodus 20:18-19). God instructed His people to place another fear above the fear of physical death—the fear of sinning (Exodus 20:20). In each case, the people feared consequences created by God. But God instructed them to be much more concerned about the negative consequences of sin than the fear they had of dying physically from hearing His voice.

To reflect upon this distinction, it would seem that God's admonition is to embrace the belief that the adverse consequences of sin are materially worse than the risk of physical death. To fear God then would be to believe that the moral cause-effect relationships He built into the universe are real, and will be enforced. This in spite of the delay that is typical between the sin and the negative consequence.

To believe that what God says is true about what is good and bad for us is to *fear God*. To *fear God* is to walk in the ways that actually lead to our ultimate benefit. Jesus stated to His disciples that the way to life often looks more difficult and less desirable than the way that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14). In order to choose that which appears to the eye to be less desirable requires faith that it is, in fact, a better way. A way that leads to greater benefit.

This is wisdom, to choose a more difficult way when you feel like hanging on to your own way, which seems easier. To trust that God's instructions are superior to what we are told by our own senses (1 John 2:15-16).

To the admonition that the beginning of wisdom is to fear God, Solomon adds, *and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding* (vs 10). The word for *Holy One* is in the plural tense. It could be translated as "sacred." It is a reference to the Divine, the everlasting, triune God and His ways. Holiness is the reality of God's character and being. It is beyond our capacity to fully understand, at least the way we normally think about it—as an intellectual enterprise.

Here, Solomon is using *knowledge* as a synonym for "perception." It is not about figuring out *the Holy One*. It is about acknowledging Him as reality and trusting in Him, even the parts you

cannot truly figure out. Paradoxically, this is *understanding*—accepting what you can know, acknowledging what you can't, and trusting the enigmatic path of the divine.

To fear God is to believe that the consequences He tells us about are real, that we should pay attention to them foremost. That provides motivation for us to seek and follow the ways of wisdom, even though they are more challenging. This seed of faith then leads us to actual *knowledge* of God, and *understanding* about the realities of life. We first believe, then we know.

Solomon gives justification for this: *for by me your days will be multiplied, and years of life will be added to you* (vs 11). The *me* here is likely Lady Wisdom, but could be a reference to Solomon himself as the sage/Lady Wisdom's messenger. The point is still the same. The binary choice we have is between the path of wisdom and the path of wickedness.

The path of wisdom leads to *multiplied days* and *years added to life*. This speaks to the practicalities of longevity due to the byproducts of wisdom, which include peace (mental health) and good health (avoiding self-destructive behaviors). But it also infers a compounding of these effects into a higher level of spiritual fulfillment.

Even though we cannot fully grasp or understand the workings of God, this is the evidence that it is the right path: It benefits us. God's desire is for our best. His instructions are for our good (Deuteronomy 10:13). There is a delay between good actions and good results, as with any investment (Ecclesiastes 11:1). But the result is certain, it is God's design (Romans 1:24, 26, 28).

These terms (*add, multiplied*) are terms of increase. It is not a guarantee that those who choose wisdom will live into old age. It is a poetic way of saying that our lives will be better than they would otherwise. The value of their days will increase. In a mathematical sense, following the path of wisdom helps to mitigate a lot of things that can lead to bad health and an untimely death. But this likely is a reference to quality more than quantity. Your quality of life will be better. And it is also the key to unlocking eternity—no matter when you die on earth, you will continue to exist in Heaven, experiencing abundant *life* forever (1 Corinthians 3:11-17; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

One of Solomon's main agendas is to show us how wisdom benefits us. Therefore, Solomon explains: *if you are wise, you are wise for yourself* (12). Wisdom is in our best interest. Although wisdom certainly has a benefit for community, that benefit begins with the individual. We must lead ourselves before we can lead others. To be a good example we must learn first, then teach.

It is like when the airlines instruct you to put your own life jacket on before helping others. We can only operate effectively in community when we are thriving within our own personhood. That occurs when we recognize the reality of God's creative order by believing what He tells us about the consequences of our actions—the fear of the Lord. Then it depends on daily application, making wise choices and avoiding foolish choices.

The antithesis of the way of wisdom in Chapter 9 is often described as scoffing or mockery. The scoffing would be to mock the idea that “anyone knows better than me.” The opposite of faith is pride (Habakkuk 2:4). Faith that “God knows what is best for me” opposes the belief that “I

know what is best for me.” The original temptation (and sin) was founded on the idea that “I know better” (Genesis 3:6; 1 John 2:15-16).

Wisdom benefits the individual. Wisdom is making choices consistent with faith that God’s instruction is for our best. Scoffing at God’s instructions of wisdom harms the individual: *and if you scoff, you alone will bear it* (vs 12).

Certainly, choosing the path of wickedness has an impact on others. But they must choose to accept or reject that impact. In the final analysis, the way of the scoffer is something he must *bear* alone. Adam attempted to blame God and Eve for his own choice to eat (Genesis 3:12). However, he alone bore the responsibility for his choice (Romans 5:14). The Apostle Paul asserts that each believer has the responsibility not only to bear their own burdens, but to also bear the burden of others (Galatians 6:5, 2).

The scoffer who refuses wisdom is trapped within a prison of himself, his flesh, and his appetites. The consequences of his action, of his choice, lands squarely on his own shoulders. We try to wiggle out of this by blaming others, we lean into phrases like “misery loves company” because we want to bring others down to share in our sulking. But in the end, wickedness is a lonely enterprise. It may pollute your sphere of influence, but those affected can choose to recover and go another way. You are then left to deal with (*bear*) the way of the scoffer. Each person will be judged by what they did while on earth. Each person will bear that responsibility alone (1 Corinthians 3:11-17).

Biblical Text

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.**

¹¹ **For by me your days will be multiplied,
And years of life will be added to you.**

¹² **If you are wise, you are wise for yourself,
And if you scoff, you alone will bear it.**