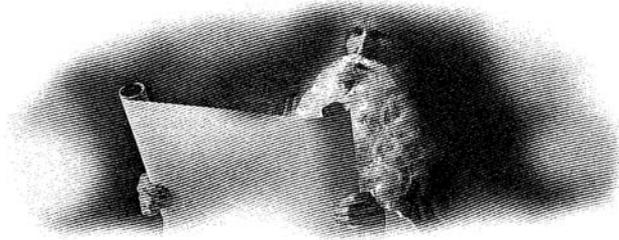


The Call of Wisdom



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Proverbs 1–3, Gen. 1:1, Exod. 19:16, 20:20, Prov. 11:30, 13:12, 15:4.*

Memory Text: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (*Proverbs 1:7, NKJV*).

From Eden onward, the root of human tragedy lies in wrong choices. “Man lost all because he chose to listen to the deceiver rather than to Him who is Truth, who alone has understanding. By the mingling of evil with good, his mind had become confused.” —Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 25.

The book of Proverbs is all about helping us to make right choices, to choose the way of God and not that of the deceiver. The father or the mother, speaking to their son, not only warns him against wrong choices but also encourages him to make the right ones. This is so important because the choices we make are literally matters of life and death.

The first three chapters of Proverbs illustrate this method of education. After having explained the purpose of the book: “to know wisdom” (*Prov. 1:2*), and having laid down the motto of the book: “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (*Prov. 1:7; compare 9:10*), the author moves back and forth from warning us against listening to foolishness to urging us to respond to the call of heavenly wisdom.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 3.

The Beginning of Wisdom

In Proverbs 1:1–6, the title “the proverbs of Solomon the son of David” (*Prov. 1:1*) establishes a link between this proverb and 1 Kings 3:5–14. In Kings (as in the book of Proverbs), Solomon is presented as a son seeking wisdom from God. In addition to both referring to Solomon as “the son of David,” the two texts share significant common wording: “understand,” “wisdom,” “judgment.” Not only do these parallels confirm Solomon as the one behind the composition of the book, they also show that Proverbs is dealing with the human quest for wisdom from God.

Read Proverbs 1:7. What is wisdom? What is “the fear of the LORD”? How do these two concepts relate to each other?

“Wisdom” here is defined as a religious experience. It is related to the fear of the Lord. This important concept of the Hebrew religion is key to Proverbs. Not only does it occur repeatedly, but it also frames the entire book (*Prov. 1:7, 31:30*).

The fear of the Lord has nothing to do with the superstitious and childish fear of divine punishment. Instead, it should be understood as the acute consciousness of God’s personal presence at all times and everywhere. The fear of the Lord had characterized the people’s reaction to God’s revelation at Sinai (*Exod. 19:16, 20:20*), just as it explained their commitment to be faithful and to love God in response to His covenant with them (*Deut. 10:12*).

In short, to fear God means to be faithful to God and to love Him.

The phrase “the fear of the LORD is the *beginning* of . . . wisdom” means that wisdom originates in this “fear.” The Hebrew word for “beginning” (*reshit*) points to the first word introducing the Creation story (*Gen. 1:1*). The first lesson of wisdom, then, deals with understanding that God is our Creator, the One who gives us life and breath, and that He is always present—a God of love, justice, and redemption (*John 3:16, Ps. 89:14, Heb. 9:12*).

We are told to love God and also to fear Him. How do these two concepts relate to your own experience with the Lord?

True Education

Read Proverbs 1:8–19. What two contrasting ways of “education” are presented in these verses? What’s the basic message here, not just for parents but for everyone who fears the Lord?

Education is, first of all, a family matter, and true education comes, first and foremost, from the parents. In these verses, this education is called “instruction” and even “law.” The Hebrew word for law, *torah*, means “direction.” The parents are to point their children in the right direction. In contrast, the other type of “education” is not identified, not given a name. It is simply acknowledged as the voice of sinners, which leads in the wrong direction.

Also, the words “my son,” not to be taken in a gender exclusive sense, are repeated many times, emphasizing parental instruction. Each parent—“your father,” “your mother” (*NKJV*)—is clearly identified in the singular and is personally involved, while the other camp is an anonymous plural, “sinners.”

“In His wisdom the Lord has decreed that the family shall be the greatest of all educational agencies. It is in the home that the education of the child is to begin. Here is his first school. Here, with his parents as instructors, he is to learn the lessons that are to guide him throughout life. . . . The educational influences of the home are a decided power for good or for evil. . . . If the child is not instructed aright here, Satan will educate him through agencies of his choosing.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 182.

The best argument on behalf of family education is its results. These are the inner qualities of character, which are like ornaments on the head and around the neck. In the Middle Eastern culture, precious collars and bracelets were passed on from parents to children as a heritage of value. Education matters more, though, than material riches. The time spent with our children will be of much greater value for them than the time spent at our businesses. Also, the reference to the neck and the head, which is the individual’s face, suggests that education will shape his or her personality. In the way of fools or sinners, only the feet (*Prov. 1:15*) are mentioned, as if the wayward son had lost his identity.

How can we learn to resist the temptations that culture, society, friends, or even family might throw our way?

The Call of Wisdom

Read Proverbs 1:20, 21. How is wisdom presented here? What are we being told?

While the sinners “lie in wait” and “lurk secretly” (*Prov. 1:11, 18, NKJV*), wisdom “calls aloud outside” (*vs. 20, NKJV*), “cries out in the chief concourses” (*vs. 21, NKJV*), and “speaks her words” (*vs. 21, NKJV*). Wisdom is here personified, and her offer is given to the man and the woman on the street. It is for everyone in the real business of life. Amid the noise and rancor of so many products and so many sellers, the call of wisdom must be loud; otherwise, she would not be heard against the clamor of so many other voices.

Read Proverbs 1:22–32. What is the result of rejecting wisdom?

The reason that people reject wisdom has nothing to do with wisdom itself and everything to do with the character of those who reject her. These are described as arrogant and disdainful (*Prov. 1:25; compare vs. 30*), as if they know better. The implication is that wisdom is for the naive and the simple. And yet, those who reject wisdom are simple and naive; they are fools who “hate knowledge” (*Prov. 1:22, NKJV; compare vs. 29*).

Those who reject wisdom will reap the fruit of their rejection. Having refused to choose the fear of the Lord, they will have to be content with themselves: they will be “full with their own fancies” (*Prov. 1:31, NKJV*). When we reject wisdom from above, we often end up with the fables and lies that we fabricate for ourselves or the fables and lies that others fabricate for us and that we so readily accept. In this way, we replace God with idols. Ironically, those who despise religion, mocking those they judge as simple and naive, often are superstitious in their own way, placing value on the most fleeting and useless things that, in the end, can never satisfy the most basic needs of the heart.

Read Proverbs 1:33. Given the context in what came before, what promise and hope are found here for us? How is this promise manifested in our own experience?

The Benefit of Wisdom

Read Proverbs 2:1–5. What are the conditions for understanding the “fear of the LORD”? What choices do we have to make in this matter?

Three times the discourse is introduced with the conjunction “if,” marking three stages in the progression of education. The first “if” introduces the passive stage of listening; that is, simply being receptive and attentive to the words of wisdom (*Prov. 2:1, 2*). The second “if” introduces the active response of crying and asking for wisdom (*vs. 3*). The third “if” introduces passionate involvement in seeking and searching for wisdom as we would for “hidden treasures” (*vs. 4*).

Read Proverbs 2:6–9. What are the conditions for understanding righteousness? What is God’s responsibility in the acquisition of wisdom?

Note that the phrase “the LORD gives” in verse 6 (*NKJV*) responds to the phrase “you will . . . find the knowledge of God” in verse 5 (*NIV*). Wisdom, like salvation, is a gift from God. As much as the first paragraph described the human process, this paragraph describes the divine work: He gives wisdom; He stores wisdom; and He guards and preserves the way of the wise.

Read Proverbs 2:10–22. What happens when wisdom has finally found a home in the heart?

“When wisdom enters your heart,” it marks the final stage of conversion. Not only will we enjoy the knowledge of the Lord, but it will be a pleasant experience to our souls (*vs. 10, NKJV*). We will also be protected from the way of evil (*vs. 12*) and from the seduction of evil (*vs. 16*), and we will walk in the path of righteousness (*vs. 20*).

Read Proverbs 2:13, 17. What is the first step of wickedness, and where does it lead?

Though we are sinners, we don’t have to fall into evil. The ones depicted as on the wrong path must have first left the right path. Wickedness, then, is understood first of all as a lack of faithfulness. Sin begins subtly and innocently, but before long the sinner not only does wickedly but also enjoys it.

What should it tell you about yourself if, heaven forbid, you enjoy doing evil? Or even worse, if you don’t even deem it evil anymore?

Do Not Forget!

Read Proverbs 3:7. What is the trap of being wise in one's own eyes?

To be wise in one's own eyes will lead to the illusion that one does not need God to be wise. This is a hopeless situation. "There is more hope for a fool than for them" (*Prov. 26:12, NIV*). Again, wisdom is described as a religious commitment. To be wise means to keep God's commandments (*Prov. 3:1*), to display "mercy and truth" (*vs. 3*), and to "trust in the LORD" (*vs. 5*). Wisdom implies an intimate relationship with God. Note the repeated reference to the heart (*vss. 1, 3, 5*), the seat of our personal response to God's influence. (The heart was already mentioned in Proverbs 2:10 as the place wisdom should enter.)

Read Proverbs 3:13–18. What reward comes with the gift of wisdom?

Wisdom is associated with life and health (*Prov. 3:2, 8, 16, 18, 22*). One of the most suggestive images is the "tree of life" (*vs. 18*), a promise repeated several times in the book (*Prov. 11:30, 13:12, 15:4*). This metaphor alludes to the Garden of Eden. This promise does not mean that the *acquisition* of wisdom will provide eternal life; instead, the idea is that the quality of life with God, which our first parents enjoyed in Eden, can to some measure be recovered. When we live with God, we get some inkling, some hints, of Eden; even better, we learn to hope in the promised recovery of this lost kingdom (*see Daniel 7:18*).

Read Proverbs 3:19, 20. Why is the need for wisdom so vital?

The sudden reference to the Creation story seems to be out of place in this context. Yet, the use of wisdom at Creation reinforces the argument of verse 18, which associates wisdom with the tree of life. If God used wisdom to create the heavens and the earth, wisdom is not a trivial matter. The scope of wisdom is cosmic, going beyond the limits of our earthly existence. Wisdom concerns our eternal life, as well. This lesson is implied in the reference to the tree of life, reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. This perspective is also contained in the promise that concludes our passage: "The wise shall inherit glory" (*Prov. 3:35*).

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Hidden Treasure,” pp. 111–114, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*; “A Blessing in the Home,” p. 334, in *Messages to Young People*; “Study of Physiology,” pp. 197, 198, in *Education*; Ellen G. White Comments, p. 1156, in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3.

“The youth need to understand the deep truth underlying the Bible statement that with God ‘is the fountain of life.’ Psalm 36:9. Not only is He the originator of all, but He is the life of everything that lives. It is His life that we receive in the sunshine, in the pure, sweet air, in the food which builds up our bodies and sustains our strength. It is by His life that we exist, hour by hour, moment by moment. Except as perverted by sin, all His gifts tend to life, to health and joy.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, pp. 197, 198.

“Many cherish the impression that devotion to God is detrimental to health and to cheerful happiness in the social relations of life. But those who walk in the path of wisdom and holiness find that ‘godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.’ They are alive to the enjoyment of life’s real pleasures.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1156.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge? How can someone have a lot of knowledge and not wisdom? After all, who doesn’t know personally, or at least know about, some very knowledgeable people who seem to have no wisdom?
- 2 Dwell more on the idea of “the fear of the LORD.” If “there is no fear in love” (1 John 4:18), how can we fear the Lord and still love Him? How do we reconcile the tension between justice and love in “the fear of the LORD”?
- 3 Why is being “wise in one’s own eyes” such a dangerous state to be in, especially when we consider how corrupt the human heart is and how easy it is for us to rationalize just about any behavior we want? Think of those who have rationalized the worst of behaviors. How can we make sure we don’t do the same thing?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Proverbs 1:7, 3:5–9*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Explore the meaning and relevancy of wisdom and the fear of the Lord as the basis of biblical spirituality.

Feel: Foster the presence of God in everyday life.

Do: Implement the fear of the Lord as a fundamental part of his or her lifestyle. Cultivate the sense of God’s closeness and practice discipline in order to experience and nurture a balanced, productive, and happy life.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Wisdom and the Fear of God

A How does fearing God open the way for gaining true knowledge and wisdom?

B What definitions can you provide to explain what it means to fear God?

C Why is discipline so important in relation to wisdom and fearing the Lord?

II. Feel: Wisdom and Our Motivations

A How can fear and love be combined?

B How can you emotionally support the decisions of others to honor God and live according to His revealed will? How can doing so nurture and sustain your own commitments to serve Him and live in His presence?

C What type of motivations for respecting God may help you to live a harmonious life?

III. Do: Wisdom and Discipline

A How can you cultivate the awareness of God’s presence?

B How can the implementation of clear boundaries in life be done without moralizing or falling into the danger of legalism?

C In what ways can you build a disciplined and meaningful relationship with God?

► **Summary:** The call of wisdom to live in God’s presence enables people to discern between good and evil and do what is right.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Proverbs 1:7, 3:5–9*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The book of Proverbs begins with an introduction emphasizing the importance of true wisdom. Wisdom is a tree of life (3:18; see also 11:30, 13:12, 15:4), creative power (3:19, 20), and more precious than gold or rubies (vss. 14, 15). Without this capacity to discern between good and evil, one cannot live a meaningful life (2:11–16; 3:2, 4, 13, 16, 17). Wisdom not only is the ability to distinguish between good and evil but also involves following what is right (3:5–9), thus acknowledging and honoring God in our daily lives.

Just for Teachers: This week’s lesson should help us to understand better the meaning of the “fear of God.” Proverbs presents a sharp contrast between two allegorical women: Wisdom and Folly. The book begins positively by stressing wisdom as the motivation for following a prudent path to a fulfilling life. This wisdom comes from above and is rooted in the fear of the Lord.

Opening Discussion:

- ❶ What is the difference between fear as anxiety and terror and fear as respect and worship?
- ❷ Of all the biblical books, Proverbs is the most tightly connected with the lifestyle characterized by “the fear of the LORD.” Why is the concept of the fear of God so dominant in Proverbs and closely related to wisdom and discipline?
- ❸ How can you train your children to fear the Lord? Consider the following: “Parents are to look upon their children as entrusted to them of God to be educated for the family above. Train them in the fear and love of God; for ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’”—Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 23.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: You can appreciate and perceive the relevancy and urgency of God’s call to fear Him when you understand the meaning of His command to “fear the LORD.”

Bible Commentary

The principal theme in wisdom literature is to fear the Lord. You cannot be wise without it. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (*Prov. 1:7, see also Prov. 9:10, Job 28:28, and Ps. 111:10*).

I. The Fear of God as the Key for Gaining Wisdom (*Review Deuteronomy 31:12, 13 and Proverbs 3:7 with your class.*)

We do not naturally know how to fear God, and, as a result, we have lost sight of its relevancy. Consequently, we need to learn how to experience it afresh (*Deut. 31:12, 13*). The fear of the Lord does not mean to be scared but to tremble in awe before His holiness. He is the God of love, the Other One, the God of truth and justice. Thus, we admire, follow, and worship Him, for no one is like Him (*Exod. 34:6–8, Isa. 40:25–29, 44:6–8*).

Consider This: Study with your class the meaning of the first occurrence of the expression “fear of God” in the Bible. Note the words of Abraham to Abimelech when he laments that “surely the fear of God” was not in Egypt (*Gen. 20:11*). Was Abraham fearing God in this situation, or was he more afraid of the king? Explain your answer.

■ *At Mount Sinai, God spoke, and the people were afraid. What is the meaning of Moses’ statement: “ ‘Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning’ ”* (*Exod. 20:20, NIV*)?

■ *There is the saying, “He who kneels before God can stand before anyone.” What does this mean, and how true is it?*

II. Definitions of Fearing God (*Review Deuteronomy 10:12, 13 and Proverbs 8:13 with your class.*)

Fearing God results in accepting and responding to God’s grace. But what does it mean to put that fear into practice?

1. *To fear God means to fear to grieve Him.* When they were small, a man’s children would ask, “Daddy, whom should we marry?” His simple answer: “Marry someone who fears to grieve God! Why? Because only if that person fears to make God sad will he or she fear to make you sad! But if he or she does not care about or have respect for God, that person will have no respect for or care about you!”

Our relationship with God is the most important relationship in life; all

other relationships spring from it. “To fear the LORD is to hate evil” (*Prov. 8:13, NIV*). Fearing God means to make Him happy, like a child, out of love, seeking to make a parent happy. Too simple? Listen to the words of Jesus: “‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ ” (*Matt. 18:3, NIV*).

2. *To fear God means to respect Him and His will, making all our decisions in regard to Him.* As we are unable to always think about our parent, spouse, or child, likewise we are unable at all times to think about God. However, a faithful child, parent, or spouse will always make his or her decisions in regard and respect to loved ones. Similarly, we ought to make all our decisions in regard to God, His Word, His law, and His will.

Biblically, to fear means to revere and worship God. “Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him” (*Ps. 33:8, NIV; see also Eccles. 8:12, 13; Jer. 10:6, 7*).

3. *To fear God means to love and obey Him.* The concept of love in the notion of fear is not present in our modern languages. This dimension is lost and is preserved only in the biblical Hebrew: “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?” (*Deut. 10:12, 13, NIV; see also Ps. 103:17*). To fear God means to be in love with Him, in total submission and admirable obedience.

4. *To fear God means to cultivate the awareness that He is present.* He always sees us, we cannot flee from His presence, and His eye is constantly on us. This does not mean that He is a heavenly controller but, instead, He is a loving, caring parent. “The eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him” (*Ps. 33:18, NIV*). The fear of God is an acute consciousness of God’s eye upon us and having the full assurance that we are living in His presence.

In order to cultivate a sense of awe before God, we need to enjoy His presence, sense His holiness, and maintain a correct trembling before His grace and love. “‘Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD Almighty!’ ” (*Isa. 6:3, NIV; see also Ps. 2:11, 12; Phil. 2:12, 13*). Superior to His creation in every way, God is not our equal partner or a sentimental God but a consuming fire and the God of faithful love.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How did David experience the fear of the Lord? Reflect on his experience: “I [David] have set the LORD always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved” (*Ps. 16:8*). How did he overcome fears, according to Psalm 56:3, 4? Contrast it with Psalms 36:1 and 86:14.
- 2 Moses did not fear Pharaoh’s anger but the Living God, and “he persevered because he saw him who is invisible” (*Heb. 11:27, NIV*). What role does faith play in seeing the invisible God?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The book of Proverbs states that we should “fear the LORD and shun evil” (3:7, *NIV*). Explain to your class how regular prayer, daily Bible study, and witnessing about God’s goodness will enhance our awareness of God’s presence in our lives.

Thought Questions:

- ❶ What are practical ways for saying No to evil and avoiding evil behavior?
- ❷ What is the opposite of running away from evil? Discuss what that means.

Application Questions:

- ❶ How can one emphasize loving God and obeying Him out of gratitude for what He did and is doing in our lives?
- ❷ Why is discipline so crucial in gaining wisdom?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Study with your class the meaning of the term *wisdom*. What are similar terms that express the same idea? What are the characteristics of wisdom in the Bible? Study especially Proverbs 2, 3 from this perspective.

Activities:

- ❶ Suggest that, for one week, class members imagine God’s presence by doing one of the following: (1) put another plate on the table to remind them that Jesus is eating with them; or (2) while reading, watching TV, or working on their computers, place a chair for Jesus beside them to represent His participation in these activities.
- ❷ It is not difficult to find references about the “fear of the LORD” in Proverbs, because it is a dominant theme. In the New International Version, “fear the LORD” is used six times (1:29, 3:7, 8:13, 14:16, 15:33, 24:21); the phrase “the fear of the LORD” occurs ten times (1:7, 2:5, 9:10, 10:27, 14:27, 15:16, 16:6, 19:23, 22:4, 23:17); the book commends everyone who “fears the LORD” (14:2, 26, *NIV*); and culminates with the praise of the woman who “fears the LORD” (31:30, *NIV*). By design, this notion often occurs in biblical wisdom literature (Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes), thus underlining that we can be wise only if we cultivate a personal relationship with God. By using a concordance or Bible software, discover where and how often this theme appears in the rest of the Bible.