

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Lecture 3, The Fear of the Lord

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This is Dr. Knut Heim in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number three, The Fear of the Lord, Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10.

Welcome to lecture three on the biblical book of Proverbs.

Remember in lecture two we were looking at the introduction to the book, verses one to six in the opening chapter, and I had already briefly made reference to verse seven, the kind of quintessential maxim, and in many ways summary of everything with regard to the book of Proverbs, wisdom and faith. And I'm going to read that again now, and in this third lecture in the series, we will focus almost exclusively on the interpretation of this particular verse and some other related verses that mention specifically the fear of the Lord. And part of the aim of this particular lecture is really to explore with the help of some key texts what the meaning of the phrase fear of the Lord is, and then to apply that with regard to the intellectual enterprise that is the study of the book of Proverbs.

So here we go. Verse seven I read again, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Let me just repeat that again. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

In a moment or two, we will look at the whole of this verse, but for now, I want to focus first of all on the phrase fear of the Lord. Then I'm going to look at the meaning of the word that is translated beginning, beginning of wisdom, and then we will look at the antithesis of true wisdom, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord in the second half of that verse. So that's how we're going to do it.

So, what does the fear of the Lord mean? Well, if we take it literally, which by the way I'm suggesting we should not, and I will explain that in a minute, but if we take it literally what it means is to be afraid of God. And if we were to take it this way and take the literally then the image of God that we would have here is not so much of a 20th-century or 21st-century western teacher where corporal punishment in school is illegal, but we would probably envisage God as some kind of very strict teacher with a big stick whom even in Europe my parents in the 1930s used to know and experience who would be regularly corporally punished by their very strict teachers at school. So the idea would then be God is this strict kind of parent-teacher figure who will slap our wrists for every little thing we do wrong and so we better learn what he wants us to learn and study or else.

Now may I suggest this is completely the wrong approach to this phrase the fear of the Lord and I'm now going to try and explain that a little bit more. So first of all I want to say and then argue, and justify that this phrase the fear of the Lord is a so-called idiom and an idiom is really a combination of words in such a way that the words as a string of words in that sequence mean something not just something more but something different from the sum of the meaning of the individual words of the idiomatic phrase. This is a very important principle.

I give you a few examples of idioms to help you see what I mean by that. So for example if I'm a teacher and I've tried to teach you something about let's say quantum physics and then I suddenly interrupt myself and I say I hope you've paid attention and you are able to catch my drift. Have you caught my drift? That's an idiom.

Now I have no idea what a drift is in that regard. Does it envisage me sitting on a sledge drifting down a snow slope or am I drifting on a float on a river or in an ocean and how would you catch my drift? What kind of catching would that be? No. The idiomatic phrase catch my drift means have you understood the deeper significance of what I have been teaching you? Did you catch my drift? Now nothing in the phrase catch my drift has any connection with you gaining a deeper understanding of what I've been trying to teach you.

That's what an idiom does. The same thing is true with the phrase fear of the Lord. And what I now want to suggest to you is that fear of the Lord is an idiom that tries to express obedient trust in God.

I repeat that obedient trust in God. So, fear of the Lord does not mean being afraid of God but having a positive, trusting relationship with God that then leads to a positively inspired obedience not because out of fear but motivated by trust. I'm now going to turn to a key passage that I think explains this very well.

And this passage is really from the context of the self-revelation of God at Sinai at the end of the exodus of God's liberation of the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt. And we are looking at chapter 18 of the book of Ecclesiastes. And just one moment.

Sorry, not chapter 18. We are looking at chapter 20 of the book of Exodus. What happens in chapter 20 is that God reveals himself on Horeb and he on Sinai.

And the people see God in all of God's splendour and majesty and holiness and might. It is a very typically described theophany, an appearance of God in modes of existence of God that are perceptible through human senses like the ears, the eyes, maybe even the nose, and potentially the touch. And what happens is the people

after this first encounter with God, even the elders of the people who met God on the mountain together with Moses, are afraid.

And they now go and they tell Moses, Moses, God wants to meet with us again tomorrow. But we are afraid. We are scared.

We are terrified. And we think it's a much better idea if you go as our representative on your own and you talk with God and then God can tell you what he wants us to know and you can come back down from the mountain and tell us. So here we have a clear context of people being afraid of God.

They don't want to disobey God. They do want to obey God, but they are so afraid of God that they don't want to meet with God face to face, but they're sending an intermediary. And so, then the following day, Moses does indeed go up to the mountain to meet with God on his own.

And the following conversation ensues. I read from verse 18. When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance and said to Moses, you speak to us and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us or we will die.

Moses said to the people, do not be afraid for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin. Did you get that? Let me read it again. This is what Moses says.

Do not be afraid for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him in you so that you do not sin. So, what's happening is here is the very moment of the beginning of the negotiations of the great covenant between God and his people on Mount Sinai, the Sinai or the Sinaitic covenant. The people are afraid of God as God is about to tell them what he wants them to do.

And as they send Moses, Moses then tells the people what God wants them to do with this. And he says, do not be afraid, but God wants to put the fear of him upon you. So, in this phrase, fear in the sense of terror or anxiety or fearfulness or anxiousness is contrasted with fear of God.

And the very next phrase then explains the nature of the fear of God that God wants to put upon them. And it's this, I'll read the whole verse again so that you can catch it in its context. Do not be afraid for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you, wait for it, so that you do not sin.

And then God reveals the covenant, the stipulations of the covenant, the commandments and so on to the people of Israel and asks them to enter into a covenant of voluntary obedience in response to the great liberating saving acts of

God that God has done for them in bringing them out of bondage. God now wants them to put their trust in him, not out of anxiety and fear, but out of trust and gratitude. And then to voluntarily, freely obey God out of the deep orientation of their hearts, not out of fear, but because it is the right thing to do.

So that's kind of in a nutshell how I interpret fear of the Lord. Of course, I'm not there by saying that we should not also have reverence for God and I'm not also saying that it is not sometimes appropriate to be afraid of God because God is indeed a very mighty being and a very holy being and I don't think we should be blasé in the way in which we interact with God. I think the proper way of interacting with God is one with reverence, with awe, with wonder, with deep humility and sometimes quite appropriately with a sense of our own shortcomings, our own limitations, our guilt and maybe our sins at some times in our lives.

And then the appropriate way, of course, is to ask for God's forgiveness with fear and trembling because we should never take for granted the great and costly mercy of God in God's forgiveness of our sins through the very costly and painful death of Christ on the cross. But that's not what fear of the Lord is about. Fear of the Lord is about a trusting relationship with God that naturally, as a natural outflow of that relationship with God, leads to a godly life.

And if you think about it, we actually have a modern idiom which uses exactly this phrase, fear the Lord, in an idiomatic way to talk about Jews or Christians, modern Jews or Christians, whom we regard as exemplary people in their faith and in their conduct. And we talk about people whom we consider to be examples to ourselves or to other people around us and we speak of them and we say, so and so is such a wonderful woman. She is really someone who fears the Lord.

She is a God-fearing woman or he is a God-fearing man. And when we talk about a person like that, I bet you, if you've ever heard someone tell you about someone else whom they describe as a God-fearing woman or a God-fearing man, or you yourself know somebody who is a God-fearing man or a God-fearing woman, you never picture them and they never picture them as someone who is driven by fear. But you will, I bet you, you will think of someone who naturally lives out their faith in an exemplary way, in a natural way and in a way that shows deep devotion to God and an obedient lifestyle, an exemplary lifestyle of generosity, of love for one's neighbour, of care for the vulnerable and so on.

That's exactly what fear of the Lord is about. Now the important thing now in this phrase then, which clearly in the Book of Proverbs is an important one, is this, that, and I said this earlier in verses two and three of the opening chapter, the book is a practical book. So the faith that is being fostered in this book is one that naturally should lead to an obedient lifestyle that honours God and contributes to the welfare of other people, naturally.

So, fear of the Lord then has to do both with the relationship with God and also with practical, obedient and life-giving, life-sustaining, life-enhancing action in our own lifestyles, in our daily interactions with how we interact with other people. That's what fear of the Lord is about. And so, in line with that, let me now read chapter one, verse seven again.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. So, whatever the word beginning that is translated beginning in the New Revised Standard Version means, which we'll come to in a moment, clearly wisdom cannot be had without a personal relationship with God that leads to practical, obedient outcome. That's what a very important aspect of wisdom is.

It's not a secular thing, it's a religious thing, but it is one that comes out of relationship rather than obligation. Now let's turn to the meaning of the word translated beginning here. The reason why this is worth discussing and why if you actually look at a variety of different Bible translations, you will see that there's a number of different translations and in many of the commentaries there are different interpretations of this, is because again here we have another figure of speech because in the Hebrew the word for beginning of wisdom is *reshit hokhmah*, and *reshit* is kind of the Hebrew word derived from *rosh* which means head.

So literally what verse seven says is the fear of the Lord is the head of wisdom, and that is what commonly we call a metaphor. What does the head of wisdom mean? It doesn't mean that wisdom is personified here, although wisdom will be personified later on in the Book of Proverbs, but the word head is used as a metaphor to explain that it has to do with some particular aspect of wisdom. And I now will read to you a short section again from Bruce Waltke's fine commentary on the Book of Proverbs.

This is from page 181, where he justifies his interpretation of the word *reshit hokhmah*, the head of wisdom, and he translates it also with the NRSV as beginning, and this is now how he explains it. Beginning of or *reshit* might mean, and then he gives three meanings, might mean temporarily first thing. So, the first thing of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.

Or it might mean, he says, qualitatively chief thing. That means the most important thing about wisdom is the fear of the Lord. And then thirdly or philosophically, it could mean principal thing, principal thing or the essence perhaps.

He then says the second meaning ranks the fear of the Lord as just another wisdom teaching and allows that wisdom can be had apart from it. That notion hardly fits this context, which is not concerned as yet to state the specific content of wisdom, but to prepare the way for it. And now here's an important part of the exegetical argument that Waltke presents.

He says the ambiguity, namely it could mean all three of these things, and by the way other commentaries have added four and five meanings, actually two other meanings to the ones that Waltke discusses here. He says the ambiguity of verse seven is resolved by the unambiguous word for beginning of, namely *tehillat*, in the parallel passage of chapter nine, verse ten, pointing us then to the first meaning. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.

So that's the argument. So, to summarise this rather complex kind of interpretation, what we have is we have an ambiguity. The word *reshit*, head of wisdom, is multivalent.

It can have a variety of meanings. Waltke mentions at least three, but others have a fourth and a fifth one, which I don't want to get into at this stage. But he then uses a very traditional and very fine exegetical method that goes all the way back to the ancient rabbi Hillel, who even back in those days argued that obscure passages in scriptures should be interpreted in line with more well-known, less obscure, less ambiguous, and more clear passages.

And as it happens, as Bruce Waltke rightly identified, in chapter nine of Proverbs, in verse ten, we do indeed have a similar expression that is not obscure, that is quite plain and clear. And I'm going to read that to you now. So, this is from the book of Proverbs, chapter nine, verse ten.

It says this, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. And here the word for beginning in Hebrew is the word *tehillah*, or in the construct *tehillat*. And *tehillah*, there's no question about it, the Hebrew word *tehillah* means beginning.

So, the argument goes as Bruce Waltke presents it, he says, well, in chapter one, verse seven, the phrase, the fear of the Lord is the head of wisdom is ambiguous, we don't really know, and that's a problem. And how can we possibly find the right answer? Ah, but thankfully, we have chapter nine, verse ten, which is quite similar, it's a similar phrase. And there is another word, which means clearly beginning.

So, it must mean beginning here as well. And to be honest, this is a very common argument, it's a very convincing argument, and it is almost universally followed by modern scholars. However, I want to now argue against that.

But as I do so, I want you to know that I am arguing a minority position. I think I'm right. But you do need to realize, that I've given you the main line interpretation of this verse.

But here is my interpretation and my argument for how I interpret it. And I want to say, that this is really important to a lot of what we will be doing as we continue to read the Book of Proverbs. I want to say this to you, that what we have, and here I make a broader argument first of all before I bring it back to the specifics of chapter one, verse seven, and chapter nine, verse ten.

But the broader argument that I want to present is this, that in the Book of Proverbs, similar to the Book of Job, and the Psalter, and the Song of Songs, what we have as a genre of literature is poetry. The Book of Proverbs is a poetic text. It is a creatively artistic text.

It is a text that has been written with imagination. And the person who wrote it, the human author, was a wordsmith, a word artist, a word scientist, if you like, a creative person who has written a poetic piece of world literature, including chapter one, verse seven. In addition to that, of course, not only that, but the divine author of the biblical books across the biblical canon, but especially even more so in the poetic books, the Holy Spirit is the ultimate creative entity in the universe.

So, what I'm saying to you is this whole book has been written with imagination. And that brings me to another very highly esteemed colleague of mine, the Spanish, the Catholic Spanish Old Testament scholar, Luis Alonso Schökel, who sadly died a few years ago. He was one of the great interpreters of Hebrew poetry in the 20th century.

He's influenced especially the Spanish-speaking world, Latino scholars across the world, and rightly so, a fabulous, fabulous scholar. And in one of his key publications, which is called *A Manual of Hebrew Poetry*, I think published in 1984, 1988, I can't remember precisely, in this book he argues that we need to be much more imaginative in how we engage with biblical text in general and poetic text in particular. And he coined a catchphrase that I very often quote, and I'm now going to quote it to you, and you will hear me say this again and again and again as we go through this lecture series.

And it's this, simply what has been written with imagination must be read with imagination. Because it's so important, I'm going to repeat it. What has been written with imagination must be read with imagination.

And so, what I want to say to you is that when the writer of chapter 1, verse 7, uses a metaphor, a poetic expression, rather than a literal word for beginning, there was a reason why he did that. The argument of Waltke and others, although they don't say that, implies that the artistic expression, the head of wisdom, is a problem. It's actually a shortcoming in the literary production of this very important verse.

And frankly speaking, although most scholars wouldn't actually say that, the implication behind the argument is that the author of 1, 7 made a mistake. They used a flowery poetic expression and confused us poor readers by creating terrible ambiguity. And now we have this problem and we don't know what it means.

Thank goodness someone else or he himself later on corrected himself in chapter 9, verse 10, and told us plain what it means. Really? Really? Really? Would you not think that in the introduction to the book, where the author wants to help us to know how to approach the book and tells us, this is what you're going to learn, these are the kinds of people I want to engage with the book, this is the kind of practical application that should come out of it, and these are the religious and spiritual attitudes you should have and strive for as you engage in the educational enterprise you are about to embark on. Do you really think that that author didn't think through what he said when he comes to the most important part of his introduction, this fabulous religious maxim, the fear of the Lord is the rashit of knowledge? You really think he made a mistake? No! The ambiguous, the multivalent expression that says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, the fear of the Lord is the most important thing about wisdom, the fear of the Lord is the very essence of wisdom.

He wanted to say all three of those with one expression. This is deliberate ambiguity. This is ambiguity as an asset rather than a drawback.

This is beauty. This has been written with imagination in order to engage our imagination. So that we realize that our relationship with God and our natural willingness to be obedient out of gratitude is not only the beginning of knowledge, not only the most important thing about the intellectual enterprise, but it is the very essence that will help us to reach the highest goal of true wisdom education where it becomes part of our very self.

So that we engage in this intellectual enterprise wisely with a deep religious, spiritual attitude that enhances rather than restricts the educational achievements that we are about to reach for. So, remember then as you engage not only with this lecture series, but of course through a continual reading and study of the Book of Proverbs for its own sake, irrespective of the lectures that you're hearing now, the essence, the most important thing and the beginning of it all of the wisdom enterprise is the fear of the Lord. Now I want to just connect a little bit with something I said earlier in Lecture 1 when I introduced the whole of the book.

We mentioned that on the one hand, the Book of Proverbs does not mention any of the key religious concepts that are so important in almost all of the other books of the Bible, both in the Old and in the New Testament, namely the covenant with God at Sinai, or the temple, or priests, or sacrifices, or the exodus. None of this is mentioned in the Book of Proverbs, which has in the past, in the kind of mid-20th century, led some scholars to argue that the wisdom of the Book of Proverbs is a

secular wisdom, most famously done by William McKane in his Old Testament library commentary on Proverbs from 1970, where he argued very strongly that wisdom literature is largely secular. Similarly, James Crenshaw sometimes comes close to saying this.

And these are some of the great, very influential scholars of biblical wisdom literature in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Now, having said that though, I also said in the introduction that the Book of Proverbs is kind of naturally low-key religious. It just takes faith in God for granted.

And the reason why I said that then is precisely because of phrases to do with the fear of the Lord, like in 1.7 and 9.10. And I now want to just take you to do two more of these phrases, but there are many more. The phrase, the fear of the Lord, is a very important key phrase, that recurs throughout the Book of Proverbs. In roughly 10% of the 915 verses in the Book of Proverbs, we're talking about 91 verses, roughly, in the book, is that right? Yeah.

91 verses talk about or mention God or allude to God directly or at very least quite clearly indirectly. So, God is almost on every page in the book. And the fear of the Lord, here is one, in chapter two, which we will deal with in more detail in one of the next lectures, says, my child, if you accept my words in verse one, and if you learn about wisdom, verses two to four, then in verse five, then you will understand the fear of the Lord, here's our word again, our idiom, and find the knowledge of God.

So, ironically, I think, and here now I want to expand this idea from Waltke saying there are three meanings to do with the head of wisdom. In chapter two, verse five, the pursuit of wisdom leads to the fear of the Lord and, in the parallel phrase, knowledge of God. So, in chapter one, verse seven, the head of wisdom is fear of the Lord, it says that it is the fear of the Lord that is one of the energizing, enabling features that will help you acquire wisdom.

But now, conversely, in chapter two, it's the other way around. It's when you learn about true wisdom, such as the one presented here in the book of Proverbs, and I would add, by the way, as a Christian theologian, in the book of Job and in the book of Ecclesiastes, there are similar wisdom texts or kind of wisdom texts, I'll come back to that later in another lecture. It's also, if you study this kind of wisdom, it will help you to live an obedient, trusting life in a direct relationship of personal knowledge of your Creator, your Redeemer, and your Savior, your Sustainer, your Guide.

So, this idea of the head of wisdom is far more rich than Bruce Waltke and many others have, until now, allowed us to see through their arguments. I now want us to go to chapter 15 very briefly. Here's another key phrase, chapter 15, verse 33, the fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom, and humility goes before honour.

Now, there's a lot that could be said about this verse, but notice this now is kind of a metaphoric expression where the fear of the Lord, on the one hand, and instruction in wisdom are made to be one and the same thing. The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom. They are one and the same thing, metaphorically speaking, not literally speaking, it's not an ontological one is exactly the same as the other, but metaphorically speaking, as the book of Proverbs continues to develop and unfold, we are now told that as we are being instructed in wisdom or as we study wisdom texts like this one, we are actually engaged in the very process and activity and state of being, of being God-fearing men and women of God.

So, what I want you to see through this is that really the book of Proverbs is thoroughly theological and it is relational in its theology. It's about knowing God and it's practical in its theology. It's about theology making a difference in our lifestyles, in our values, in our decision-making, in the way we interact with others and contribute to the common good.

So, remember, fear of the Lord is absolutely essential to wisdom.

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