

Knowing God

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] For the first time in about seven and a half years, I've produced for you this morning a sermon outline with some texts in there. That's either because I'm more organised than I've been in for seven and a half years or I'm more confused than I've been for seven and a half years.

And as I go through this, I don't want you to be as confused as I am. So hopefully that you can follow along. Proverbs, as I've said to a number of people throughout the course of the last couple of weeks, Proverbs has been doing my head in.

And it's been a lot of work to get to this point. So there's a sermon in each one of these, at least in each one of these points I want to make today. So let's pray that we might get the message of God's word to us right now.

Father, I pray that you would speak to us with clarity through your word. There's a bunch of ideas. I pray, Lord, as people pursuing wisdom, that we would not just stop here, but in fact that we would pursue you and continue to pursue you regardless of what happens.

In the next little half an hour or so. Lord, Father, we pray that you would speak to us with clarity, implant your word deep in our hearts and particularly your love might be bound around our necks, that it might be settled in our hearts, that we might be confident in who we are in you.

[1 : 14] Amen. Alistair McIntyre in his book, *After Virtue*, gives an illustration which has become quite famous. Imagine you're standing at a bus stop and a young man comes, walks up to you and says to you, hey, the Latin name for the common wild duck is *Historonicus*, *Historonicus*, *Historonicus*.

How do you make sense of that? Why did that just happen? What does it mean? There's only one way to make sense of that statement and that is to put it into a story.

You have to ask, what is the story in which that incident, that statement makes sense? Because without the story, it makes no sense.

And so McIntyre says that there's a few options. For instance, it could be a sad story that the man is in fact mentally ill and that would make sense of that little interaction you've just had.

Another possibility is that it's a case of mistaken identity. Maybe a few days earlier, the man was in a library doing some research on the Latin name of the common wild duck. He spoke to the librarian about that project he was doing to get some help and maybe you look like the librarian and so that would explain it was a case of mistaken identity at a bus stop.

[2 : 43] A further possibility, that is that he is in fact a spy and he's mistaken you for his contact and he's inadvertently passed on to you the contact code.

You see, the statement makes no sense unless you stick it into a story and the story that you put it in completely determines how you will respond to it.

Your response might be one of pity or it might be one of confusion or it might be one of anxiety of looking over your shoulder. How we live is determined by what we think the story of the world is. How we live is determined by what we think the story of the world is. And the story of the society in which we live, the secular society, is that we are here by accident and that when we die, we rot. That's the story of our society. There is no order or pattern. Everything is by chance. There's no absolute truth. There's no moral standards. This life is all there is and therefore, this is the only happiness that you will ever get.

[4 : 05] And that story determines how you live. Wisdom equals beshainment. The attitude of happiness here and now. Sexual ethics, the way you think about your money, how you raise your children, what the purpose of your work is, your relationships, everything, everything in life fits in that story.

Everything. There's nothing that it does not touch. Now, the Christian person sees the story of the world quite differently. Christianity says that we are all created by God and so that absolutely everything that we have is a gift from him, including the money that we just handed on just then. Christianity says that the problems of this world are all linked to our rejection of God. But this same God who's been rejected came into his world to redeem it, not just to redeem the world, but that one day he's going to renew the world, his broken world.

And Christianity said that this life is not the only life. It claims that this life is in fact a relatively small part of our entire existence and the greatest amount of joy and happiness is yet to come.

And so that story shapes everything in your life. There's not an area of your existence that it does not touch. And Proverbs shows us how everything is touched and shaped and impacted by that story of existence with the God of the Bible behind it and in it and through it.

[5 : 43] And so this series is about wisdom. It's about what wisdom is and how to get it and how to grow in wisdom and it's about how to allow, align our lives with that story, with ultimate reality, and Proverbs 9 verse 10 says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

That's the Christian story. It starts with God. That's where wisdom starts. Now last week I went with the following definition. I said that wisdom is becoming competent with regard to the realities of life. I ripped it off Gerhard von Rad. Wisdom is becoming competent in regard to the realities of life and I mentioned two key areas that were essential for the wise life.

Firstly, you have to see and admit that there is a pattern in this world, that God has made the world and there is a pattern. There are principles by which life customarily works. Secondly, you've got to see that you cannot know the whole pattern.

Much of the pattern is hidden from us and so that's the beginning. But the beginning as we just read out in those passages in Proverbs 1.7 it says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

[7 : 06] That's the Christian framework. That's the Christian story. And chapter 9 verse 10 says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Now they are very similar statements but they are different statements.

Proverbs 1.7 reveals that the fear of the Lord is more comprehensive than we actually think. Fear of the Lord is not just about how to do moral things.

Relationship with God, faith in God completely determines what you know about the world and how you know the world.

That's a pretty astounding and controversial statement. In our modern society it just does not think like that.

Our society thinks it's possible for people to have different faiths, different personal individual ideas about God but they're to be kept private and separate.

[8 : 12] That's a matter of faith. That's a thing over there. The general consensus is that faith, that stuff about God, is opposed to reason and that reason and knowledge can only operate in its full capacity if it's separated from faith, if it's separated from God and knowledge of God.

We're a secular society and so in the past couple of weeks media personality Andrew Denton called on those opposed to euthanasia on religious grounds to step aside from the debate.

Get out of the way. He's of the view that if you take faith out of the equation we can then have a sensible, reasonable, logical, knowledgeable discussion about the issue.

He said this to the National Press Club on the 10th of August, to those whose beliefs instruct you that only God can decide how a human being should die, I urge you step aside.

May your beliefs sustain you and those you love but do not impose them on the rest of us. See the thinking? Faith and reason, God and knowledge, they don't belong at the same table and Proverbs opens with a statement that's exact opposite.

[9 : 47] The fear of God is the beginning of knowledge. It's the beginning of how we know anything. The fear of God. Faith is the foundation from which all of our reasoning comes.

Our faith is the beginning of our knowledge. Now Denton's view is a fairly common view and it goes like this. The only things that we can be really sure of are the things that we can, that can be scientifically proven.

The facts. You might have your belief about morality and about God and that's fine. That's for faith stuff. Keep it over there. The only things that we're really sure about are the things which are scientifically proven.

But that statement can't be scientifically proven. Therefore, on its own terms, you can't be sure of it.

If you don't believe that anything that happens in this world has a supernatural cause, that's fine. But understand this. In and of itself, that is a belief.

[11 : 04] It's not a statement of fact. It is a belief. Once you've adopted that particular worldview, that particular view of reality, by faith, all of your reasoning flows out from it.

to be a convinced atheist is a position of faith. And therefore, all of your reasoning flows out from that, of how you view the world.

Everything in life or every one of us, every single person, Andrew Denton, you, me, whoever, we all make faith leaps.

All of us. And so the struggles in our society at the moment appear to be religion against no religion. When in actual fact, the real struggles in our society is religion against religion. It's faith against faith. That's the real struggle in our society.

[12 : 13] Including the religion of secularism. A religion is simply a system of beliefs that explains where life comes from, what life means and how we as human beings are meant to live.

And so, Andrew Denton stood in front of the National Press Club and proclaimed his religion is what he did. Everyone has a faith view of reality because it is the only way to get a view of reality once you have taken on that faith view all of your reasoning of how you understand the world flows from it.

And everybody has to base their entire life and all of their reasoning on some view about God that they have taken on by faith. Whether you're the committed Christian or you're the atheist.

Even to say, well, no one really knows in the end. How do you know that statement's true? It's more true to say, well, I hope no one really knows in the end.

We need faith to reject God and we need faith to embrace God. And the Christian story that we're beginning in with the book of Proverbs is that the beginning of our knowledge, the way things actually are and the way things actually work and what we're meant to do about it is God, the God of the Bible.

[13 : 54] He is the God of the Bible who is ultimate reality in and of himself. God is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom. He is the foundation of knowing how things actually are, how things actually work and what we are to do about it.

That is how we are to align our lives, live our lives according to reality. And what this means for you, that if you are a Christian, is that your relationship with God, therefore, is absolutely central to your life.

life. It's not just something that you do on Sundays. It is absolutely central. It means that God is not an add-on to your life. God is not something else that you have in your backpack to help you live a better kind of life.

Your relationship with God is the most central thing in your life. Jesus influences and flavours and shapes and determines everything you think and do in this world.

Everything. That's the book of Proverbs. Notice, though, that it's not just that God is the beginning point or the foundation of knowledge and wisdom, but the fear of the Lord is the foundation.

[15 : 18] It's a theme, this idea of theme of the Lord is a theme that runs through the whole Bible, not just in Proverbs. There are over 120 occasions in the Old Testament and New Testament where this statement occurs.

It is, if you like, the sum of everything that we're meant to be and do. There is a place in Job where God shows how important the term is when he says, have you considered my servant Job, there is none like him in all the earth, a man who fears God and shuns evil.

But the concept of fear of God raises negative connotations for it's a sense of dread, you know, be scared, be very, very, very scared of the Lord.

And this is not what the sense is when it's used here or in fact in other parts of the Bible. It's a little bit of it but it's not the entire sense. Deuteronomy 10.12 says, 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 him, serve the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I'm giving you today for your own good.

Notice it doesn't say you either fear God or love God. They're not put up against one another. The more in fact you fear, the more you love him and the more you love him, the more you will fear him.

[16 : 46] They are actually connected and they roll together. Sinclair Ferguson in his book Grow in Grace describes the fear of God as the indefinable mixture of reverence, fear, pleasure, joy, and

awe which fills our hearts when we realise who God is and what he has done for us.

Fear of God does include some sense of dread. There is a very real sense that we should dread God's judgement. You see, after Adam sinned, he was afraid in Genesis 3.10.

It's a right response. It's an appropriate response. It would be a presumption for him not to be afraid. When Paul describes the abject depravity of humanity which they've fallen into, he says in Romans 3.18, there is no fear of God before their eyes.

That is, people are neither in awe of God nor afraid of his judgement. And so, fear, dread is an appropriate response. But it doesn't explain the entire picture of the Bible when it talks about the fear of the Lord.

The Bible tells us that in his grace and his mercy, God allows himself to be our place of refuge. So, get this from Proverbs 14, verse 26.

[18 : 15] Whoever fears the Lord, has a secure fortress. And for their children, it will be a refuge.

The God we fear is our refuge and our fortress. Ferguson makes a distinction, I think, quite helpfully, between servile fear and filial fear.

The word servile comes from the Latin word service, which means slave, and filial is from filius, which means son. And so servile fear is the sort of fear a slave would have towards a harsh and unyielding master.

And Christians fall into servile fear, in fact, too often, if we don't understand the grace of God and his acceptance of us in the Lord Jesus. If we believe that we're in a performance relationship with God, then he will always appear to be a hard taskmaster who we can never please.

He will be the divine ogre ready to judge us for our failure to live up to his standards. That is, if your relationship with God is a slavish fear, then any obedience is somewhat reluctant.

[19 : 33] I'm always looking for the bare minimum. When it comes to radical generosity, you know, what's the limit on radical? always looking for the bare minimum, rather than desiring to please a loving father.

See, filial fear, on the other hand, is the loving fear of a child towards his father. And what is central, I think, to this idea of fear is the sense of reverential awe, just awe at God.

Now, it's unfortunate that we have robbed the word awe of some of its impact these days. It's been lost through a lot of flippant use, something that I do way too often and my children do.

Drove into the car park at Chats with Chase the other day and one of the kids pointed out a car and said, oh, Dad, that is an awesome car. And my immediate response was, yes.

I said, why is it awesome? It's orange. Now, it just so happens it was a half million dollar McLaren. And orange wasn't the first thing that came into mind when I saw it.

[20 : 50] I did agree it was an awesome car. You know, there is a sense of dread. You get behind the wheel of a McLaren and put your foot onto the floor, there is going to be an element of fear that's going to come to mind, I think, and you're going to feel that in a way that I don't feel it in my Ford territory.

So there is a sense of awe, but even then I think a McLaren is pushing the boundary of the definition of the word awe. A tornado is awesome.

It's something you want to look at, but it's something that you're afraid of. A burger is not awesome. It's tasty, it's not awesome. Niagara Falls is awesome.

A music CD might sound great, but it's not awesome. You see, a fear of God acknowledges the greatness of God, that he is unfathomably great.

He is infinitely greater than the tornado of Niagara Falls. He is infinitely greater than the most significant of nations. He controls all rulers. He puts the heavens in place.

[21 : 54] He spreads out the earth. He holds all things together by the power of his word. He is a God of transcendent holiness. He is glorious perfection, more than moral purity, no darkness, no evil, no brokenness at all.

He is awesome. He is worthy of our awe. That's why you see throughout the Bible, whether anyone is confronted with God at all, they fall down on their face and say, I'm not worthy to be in your presence.

fear of the Lord is trusting God. A relationship where you trust God is what it looks like to fear God. Proverbs 3, verses 5 and 6, trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not on your own understanding and in all your ways submit to him and he will make your path straight. You see, fear of the Lord means unconditional trust, not relying on how we think the world works, not relying upon our

knowledge and our wisdom of what we think the patterns are and what the patterns should be, but trust in God's revelation of how things actually are and how things actually work and what we're meant to do as a result of it.

In Isaiah 40 we get a glimpse of God's infinite greatness in holding the vast waters of the earth, all the oceans, it says he holds them in the hollow of his hand and he weighs the mountain ranges on a scale.

[23 : 26] End of Isaiah talks about God, the earth is God's footstool and in Isaiah 40 when he's talking about the greatness of God Isaiah says this, who can fathom the spirit of the Lord or instruct the Lord as his counsellor?

Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge and showed him the path of understanding? In other words, so, who was God's advisors?

Who served as his advisors? You? Me? No, Isaiah, you're ridiculous.

Who was there when he was plotting out the design of a DNA and said, actually, God, you need to do it this way? Anyone? Everyone? Point of Isaiah 40 is God wants your trust, not your advice on how the world works.

It's absurd to think that we can add anything, and yet so often we want to be his advisors. We continue to tell him how certain circumstances should be changed, and we question his wisdom when we don't understand what he's doing.

[24 : 48] every area of life. There are two questions for us. Firstly, are you willing to do whatever God says in the Bible on issue, whether you agree with it or not, because his wisdom is infinitely greater than yours?

Are you willing to trust that he and only he has the whole pattern of the way the world works? trust? And second question is, are you willing to accept anything that God sends to any area of your life, whether you understand it or not?

Because he is worthy and he is wise and he knows what's best. He knows how to grow you in wisdom. See, the fear of the Lord is a life of trust even through a life of discipline.

One of the key things we need to see and to lean on is what God says about the times when the patterns of life don't make sense for us. Those times when we can't see what God is doing.

Now I think that if we're to hold on to this, that even when the bad times come and the suffering hits, I believe this turbo charges our growth in wisdom. It's right there in verses 11 and 12 of Proverbs 3, my son, do not despise the Lord's discipline and do not resent his rebuke because the Lord disciplines those he loves.

[26 : 16] As a father, the son, he delights in. You see, what a father does at times is that they bring things into a child's life which are painful.

We actually bring them into a child's life which are painful in order for the child to grow and to flourish. And I'm assuming that every parent wants their child to make the right choices in life and so therefore discipline is essential.

People who live charmed lives live shallow lives. Our strengths and our weaknesses become obvious when they are tested.

God's discipline shapes us in the same way. You see, we don't often really trust God until we are drowning. We don't often come to see that Jesus is all that we need until Jesus is all that we have. God's discipline is designed to grow us in wisdom. It turbocharges all the things that move us towards wisdom.

[27 : 25] Bible reading, prayer, the community of believers, all that sort of thing. You see, it's also true that suffering can have exact opposite effect on someone. It can make you prouder.

Suffering can in fact make you prouder. You know, you don't understand, Steve, what I've had to go through. You've just never had what I've had to go through. Make you feel better than other people, more noble than other people.

Suffering can also make you a coward because you become so broken you couldn't face another thing. You know, I've had so many disappointments with people in life, I'm just going to completely withdraw away from people.

That's a cowardly response. Suffering can make you quite bitter. And so God's discipline that comes from his all-knowing wise hand pushes you in two different directions.

Either in growth in wisdom and greater trust in God, or it pushes you further and further towards foolishness. One or the other. One or the suffering is inevitable.

[28 : 33] It will make you wise, it will make you stupid. The fear of the Lord is the key. God's wisdom, the God's wisdom, the God's wisdom, the God of tremendous wisdom, this God who is awesome, is the God who delights in you when it happens.

It's so essential for us to know this, know this, know this. The Lord's disciplines those he loves. As a father, the son, he delights in.

You have to be absolutely sure that he loves you and delights in you when the bad things happen or the suffering is going to harden you and it's going to make you turn away from God and life and make you arrogant and proud because you think you know better than God.

Discovering the love and the mercy and the delight and the grace of God is the key to the life of fearing God, which is the beginning of wisdom and the key to growth in wisdom.

In Proverbs 3.3 it says let love and faithfulness never leave you, bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. The words love and faithfulness there are very specific in the Hebrew Old Testament.

[29 : 56] They are referring to God's covenant love and God's faithfulness and they're about his never giving up, never dying, always and forever love for his people.

The grace of God, his delight in us because of Jesus is the key to suffering, softening us and humbling us and growing us in wisdom.

So how can you be sure that God delights in us? In Hebrews 12 in the Old Testament, sorry, in the New Testament, back towards the back, these verses from Proverbs 3, verses 11 and 12 are picked up and they're dumped into Hebrews 12 and they go like this, just before it in Hebrews 12 it says this, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame and he sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. right there, right there in Hebrews 12 is the confidence that we need. We get the confidence there, right there, that we are a child of God when we see what Jesus has done for us.

You see, the baptism of Jesus, you might remember this back right at the beginning, baptism of Jesus, the spirit of God descended on him and a voice came from heaven and said, this is my son with whom I am well pleased, or this is my son, I delight in him.

[31 : 33] And right throughout his life, whenever Jesus turns to God, he says, Father, Father, Father, when the disciples say, Jesus, teach us how to pray, he says, Father, begin with our Father, except for one place, it's at the cross.

Jesus cries out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? why have you abandoned me? And the reason he cries out that is because he was being expelled, he's being rejected. He was getting what we deserve from God so that when we put our trust in him, our sins are forgiven. He took the punishment from God that we deserve so that when we believe in him, our sins are dealt with. But not just that. In John chapter 1, which we looked at last week, where Jesus is the wisdom of God, it says this about those who put their trust in the wisdom of God.

Jesus, it says, to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

[33 : 00] Children born not of natural descent nor of human decision or of a husband's will, but born of God. God, Jesus faced rejection, suffering, rejection, so that we can be included as sons of God, sons to whom he delights him.

Through what Jesus done, we adopted as sons of God, brought into God's family, Jesus lost his sonship so that we can be children of God, and therefore we can trust him in suffering because he himself has suffered.

let me tell you that that story just there is the story that rewrites everything for our world.

And that's the story that is the story that rewrites your story. Totally changes everything. It reorientates your whole worldview.

It reorientates every way that you view this world. It's the starting point and the foundation of a life of wisdom. Amen.