

CHAPTER THREE

THE WISE

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever!*

Psalm 111:10 (ESV)

*When pride comes, then comes dishonor,
But with the humble is wisdom.
³The integrity of the upright will guide them,
But the crookedness of the treacherous will destroy them.*
Proverbs 11:2-3 (NASB)

*The merciful man does himself good,
But the cruel man does himself harm.*
Proverbs 11:17 (NASB)

*The generous man will be prosperous,
And he who waters will himself be watered.*
Proverbs 11:25 (NASB)

*A wise son accepts his father's discipline,
But a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.*
Proverbs 13: 1 (NASB)

*How much better it is to get wisdom than gold!
And to get understanding is to be chosen above silver.*
Proverbs 16:16 (NASB)

*Listen to advice and accept instruction,
that you may gain wisdom for the future.*
Proverbs 19:20 (RSV)

*He who guards his mouth and his tongue,
Guards his soul from troubles.*
Proverbs 21:23 (NASB)

*A good name is to be more desired than great wealth,
Favor is better than silver and gold.*
Proverbs 22:1 (NASB)

*Do you see a man skilled in his work?
He will stand before kings;
He will not stand before obscure men.*
Proverbs 22:29 (NASB)

Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.
Ecclesiastes 7:19 (NASB)

⁷ *“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD
And whose trust is the LORD.*

⁸ *“For he will be like a tree planted by the water,
That extends its roots by a stream
And will not fear when the heat comes;
But its leaves will be green,
And it will not be anxious in a year of drought
Nor cease to yield fruit.*

Jeremiah 17:7-8 (NASB)

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
a good understanding have all those who practice it.*

Psalms 111:10(a) (RSV)

¹⁵ *He who walks righteously and speaks with sincerity,
He who rejects unjust gain
And shakes his hands so that they hold no bribe;
He who stops his ears from hearing about bloodshed
And shuts his eyes from looking upon evil;
¹⁶ He will dwell on the heights,
His refuge will be the impregnable rock;
His bread will be given him,
His water will be sure.*

Isaiah 33:15-16 (NASB)

*For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those that do evil.”*

1 Peter 3:12 (RSV)

*Whoever is wise, let him understand these things;
Whoever is discerning, let him know them.
For the ways of the LORD are right,
And the righteous will walk in them,
But transgressors will stumble in them.*

Hosea 14:9 (NASB)

“... Do not be wise in your own estimation.”

Romans 12:16 (b) (NASB)

*A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding
than a hundred blows into a fool.*

Proverbs 17:10 (RSV)

The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom.

Though it cost all you have, get understanding.

Proverbs 4:7 (NIV)

*Choose my instruction instead of silver,
knowledge rather than choice gold,*

¹¹ *for wisdom is more precious than rubies,
and nothing you desire can compare with her.*

Proverbs 8:10-11 (NIV)

As we saw with foolishness, nobody is 100% wise. Even those people whom the Bible would classify as wise were not wise all the time, or in every aspect of their character or actions. Therefore we could say that, in general terms, the wise are those people who:

- a) are genuine Christians – this is the first requirement, on which all the others depend
- b) fear God and take His teaching seriously - again, nobody will get any further up the scale without this quality
- c) try to think the same way God thinks
- d) value what God values,
- e) want what God wants.
- f) pursue knowledge and understanding
- g) aim to spend their time with wise people and to imitate them

Alternative descriptions of the wise - the 'godly', 'upright', 'blameless', 'God-fearing' and 'righteous'

The wise are also referred to in the Bible as the *godly*, the *upright*, the *blameless* the *God-fearing* and the *righteous*. These alternative phrases are used interchangeably, as different names for, or characteristics of, the same group. You could say that they express different aspects of what it means to be wise. Whichever description we use, God sees this minority group of people as precious and He protects and blesses them:

*But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself;
the LORD hears when I call to him.*

Psalm 4:3 (RSV)

*Cast your burden on the LORD,
and he will sustain you;
he will never permit the righteous to be moved.*

Psalm 55:22 (RSV)

¹⁰*His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the legs of a man;
¹¹but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.*

Psalm 147:10-11 (RSV)

¹¹*But let all who take refuge in thee rejoice,
let them ever sing for joy; and do thou defend them,
that those who love thy name may exult in thee.*

¹²*For thou dost bless the righteous, O LORD;
thou dost cover him with favour as with a shield.*

Psalm 5:11-12 (NIV)

¹⁸*The LORD is near to all who call upon him,
to all who call upon him in truth.*

¹⁹*He fulfils the desire of all who fear him,
he also hears their cry, and saves them.*

*¹²⁰The LORD preserves all who love him;
but all the wicked he will destroy.*

Psalm 145:18-20 (RSV)

Wise people pursue God and seek to acquire ever more knowledge and understanding of Him and His Word. They do so by listening diligently and persistently to what the Bible says and putting it into practice. People who do that regularly, and for a long period of time, will inevitably become wise. In fact, even our natural cleverness or IQ will increase if we spend time studying the Bible. It has a way of elevating people in every sense, including intellectually.

That is why there has been such an explosion of learning and scientific achievement since the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Study of the Bible began to take place on a much wider basis in those countries which embraced the Reformation, such as Britain, Holland, Germany, Scandinavia and Switzerland (and later America). The Bible literally changed those nations in a host of ways. It was even the foundation for the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and for the technological and communications revolution of the twentieth century.

What does wisdom consist of?

Let's look at some passages from Proverbs in which the general subject of wisdom is discussed. Note the kind of words which are used to define or illustrate what wisdom is, and what it consists of:

*¹The proverbs of Solomon,
son of David, king of Israel:
²To know wisdom and instruction,
to understand words of insight,
³to receive instruction in wise dealing,
in righteousness, justice, and equity;
⁴to give prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the youth--
⁵Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain guidance,
⁶to understand a proverb and a saying,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.
⁸Hear, my son, your father's instruction,
and forsake not your mother's teaching,
⁹for they are a graceful garland for your head
and pendants for your neck.*

Proverbs 1:1-9 (ESV)

*¹My son, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments,
²for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you.
³Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck;
write them on the tablet of your heart.
⁴So you will find favour and good success
in the sight of God and man.
⁵Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
⁶In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.*

⁷*Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD,
and turn away from evil.*

⁸*It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.*
Proverbs 3:1-8 (ESV)

¹²*“I, wisdom, dwell with prudence,
And I find knowledge and discretion.*

¹³*“The fear of the LORD is to hate evil;
Pride and arrogance and the evil way
And the perverted mouth, I hate.*

Proverbs 8:12-13 (NASB)

The main ingredients of wisdom are knowledge, understanding, insight, discretion, prudence, discernment and the fear of God

These seven words or concepts keep being mentioned again and again, whenever the Bible speaks about what wisdom is. The word *wisdom* is an umbrella term. It is made up of each of these seven ingredients or factors, and more besides. Let us therefore examine each word in turn and attempt to define them and consider why they each matter.

Knowledge

By this we mean factual information of almost every kind. However, we particularly mean knowledge of what the Bible says, from beginning to end, on every theme, issue or point. The most important knowledge we need to begin with is knowledge of the facts about who God is, what He is like, what He thinks, and what He requires of us.

If we learn about Him and His holiness, goodness, righteousness and so on then we will be in the right position to start to learn the true facts about ourselves, especially in regard to sin. We will also learn how to live and how to deal with other people and with the situations we face in life. The starting point therefore is that we need knowledge of what God says on all these things, rather than what the world says, or our own misguided opinions.

All through my life I have had an insatiable desire for knowledge and information. This continued when I became a Christian. I therefore studied the Bible and read huge numbers of books and commentaries. When older Christians saw me doing this a number of them tried to counsel me not to be like that. They thought it was excessive. In support of their argument they quoted apostle Paul:

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” “Knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up.

1 Corinthians 8:1 (RSV)

I felt rather deflated by their remarks at the time, which was partly what they intended me to feel. An insecure Christian can get very threatened by a younger believer who is rapidly gaining knowledge. Therefore they wanted to bring me down a peg or two. Yet they also had a good point as well, because knowledge *by itself*, if not accompanied by love, and also by the other aspects or ingredients of wisdom, which we shall examine below, can cause a person to puff up with pride.

Obviously, such pride is not a good thing. However, the appropriate remedy for that is not to avoid gaining knowledge. That would be absurd. The right approach is to seek to grow in love and in the other aspects of wisdom *in addition* to acquiring knowledge, not *instead of* doing so.

The way some people spoke to me all those years ago suggested that they saw knowledge and love as mutually exclusive things, as if we can choose to have one or the other, but not both. That is absolutely not what apostle Paul meant. No doubt he would be horrified at the idea of anybody taking him to mean that, or to assume that he was speaking against knowledge in any way. Knowledge is good, which is why Paul and all the apostles and prophets spent their lives dispensing it and urging people to acquire it.

The answer, of course, is that we are not to pursue knowledge *alone* or to be satisfied with it alone, without also seeking to develop many other qualities and features in our character. That is the key. We obviously need other things too, but the fact remains that knowledge is the first thing God gives us as He seeks to develop our wisdom.

Understanding

Understanding is the next stage. It means to take that knowledge referred to above and to begin to absorb it more deeply. In addition to knowing objective facts, we need to see *why* those facts are true, and *how* they operate. It means having a grasp of the meaning, significance, and practical application of those facts that we have learned about God, ourselves and other people.

It also means, referring back to what apostle Paul said above, that we need to supplement our knowledge with love and with all the other fruit of the Holy Spirit. Then we can see facts, and also other people, in a better and fuller context. Then the facts and principles that we learn from God's Word, and from our experience, will fit together better, make more sense and be held in a better balance.

Insight

Insight is a form, or sub-category, of understanding. It operates in a more specific way, i.e. relating to a certain issue, person or situation. We will be given a flash of inspired understanding which enables us to apply the truth of the facts we have learned to that particular situation or issue that we face.

So, a person might suddenly gain, or be given, an insight into the meaning of a particular verse in the Bible, or how it relates to some other verse. That may form a connection which reveals another specific truth or depth of meaning. One might also be given an insight into the nature of another person, or a situation we face, or how best to approach it.

I found that regularly in my work as a Solicitor. There would be a problem, either for a client, or a colleague, and it seemed insoluble. Then I would suddenly get an insight, which seemed to come from nowhere. It actually comes from a sudden realisation of how to apply my accumulated reservoir of knowledge and understanding to the specific person or situation that I am dealing with. The insight then unlocks or solves the problem.

I have referred to insights as being *given* to us because that is often how it happens. God Himself will speak into the mind of a person who has taken the trouble to study the Bible. He will provide the necessary flashes of inspiration, or connections. Those will then enable that person to move up a grade, so as to understand a point more deeply, especially in relation to a given issue or problem or a point which they are studying.

Discretion

Discretion has to do with having a sensitivity and awareness about whether, or when, to say a thing, or to take action, or to become involved in something. One learns over the years how right King Solomon was when he said:

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.
Ecclesiastes 3:1 (ESV)*

In particular, he goes on to say that there is:

⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:7-8 (ESV)

Discretion is primarily that part of wisdom which has to do with *knowing what the time is* and whether it is a "time to kill" or a "time to heal", a "time to plant", or a "time to pluck up what is planted". The hardest one of all is knowing the difference between "a time to keep silence" and "a time to speak". Which of us has not got that wrong countless times? We speak when it would have been wiser to say nothing, and say nothing when it would have been wiser to speak.

As we grow in discretion we gain more tact and a better sense of timing. We also develop a sensitivity as to what is appropriate and what biblical principles are applicable to that specific situation or issue. A large part of the book of Proverbs consists of advice which is almost along the lines of: "On the one hand, bear this principle in mind, but on the other hand, also bear this opposite, counter-balancing principle in mind. Then hold them both in a healthy tension and apply one, or other, or both, at the right time and in the right proportions".

That's not what the Bible actually says, but it's my own little paraphrase of King Solomon's general approach. We are meant to look at issues from every angle and examine all the pros and cons as to whether we should, or should not, take a particular approach to some situation, depending on the unique circumstances of the case before us.

We also need to consider whether we should say or do that thing openly or more discretely. Discretion was something I used to lack almost completely. I had a default-setting to speak frankly and openly all the time, even when it was unwise to do so. I have more discretion now, but I need even more.

Prudence

By prudence we mean carefulness, caution and a proper appreciation of the risks and hazards that may lie ahead for ourselves, or others, if we take a particular route. It involves being able to figure out, ahead of time, the possible unintended consequences and side-effects of a particular course of action. Then, by foreseeing them we may be able to prevent them happening. Alternatively, if such things cannot be prevented by timely intervention, then a prudent person will delay taking action until the time is more suitable. Or he may even refrain from acting altogether.

A prudent person on a team or committee can make a tremendously valuable contribution. They can often foresee, and then prevent, issues and outcomes which the others on that committee would have never even considered. Others may wrongly regard them as being negative, or even obstructive, and may be exasperated by them. Nevertheless, it is a God-given quality and is needed as one of the vital ingredients that enables us to function wisely.

As for how we get prudence, the main source is God's Word. It warns us ahead of time about countless issues, character-types and hazards. In particular, it informs us about the kinds of people we are likely to meet, i.e. fools and also the wicked, and causes us to be realistic about the nature of other people's hearts and what we can expect them to do or to try to do. That gives us general material to bear in mind as we ponder our own specific situation.

However, prudence also comes from living in close fellowship with God and hearing the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit. He nudges us and warns us about the dangers we face and what other difficulties lie ahead.

Discernment

Discernment means the ability to tell the difference between things which look or sound similar, but which are actually different. It enables us to gauge the real nature of a person, proposal or idea and to sense whether it is from God, from men, or from a demon. We are presented daily with people, opportunities and proposals which look good and claim to be good. But are they really? They could just be based on misguided human reasoning and could be a dead-end. They could even be enticing you into a trap which a person or a demon has set up for you. Then again, it could be a God-given opportunity and the person concerned could be a legitimate and genuine friend, whom God has provided for you.

An example of a person displaying discernment is Nehemiah, when he was being deceived by Shemaiah. It was at a time when Nehemiah's enemies, led by Sanballat and Tobiah, were doing everything they could to stop Nehemiah and his men from rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. They tried one trick after another and various forms of threats. But each time Nehemiah saw through them and refused to be intimidated or diverted from his task. Then they sent a supposedly friendly figure, Shemaiah. They paid him to try to persuade Nehemiah to take shelter in the Temple, i.e. to hide away rather than continue the rebuilding work.

However, Nehemiah also saw through Shemaiah, just as he had seen through the others. He discerned that his motives were false and that he had been hired by Sanballat and Tobiah to try to get him to stop the work. He also realised that Shemaiah was trying to discredit Nehemiah's good name, hoping to be able to accuse him afterwards of having run away from danger:

¹⁰ Now when I went into the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home, he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple. Let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you by night."

¹¹ But I said, "Should such a man as I run away? And what man such as I could go into the temple and live? I will not go in." ¹² And I understood and saw that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. ¹³ For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me.

Nehemiah 6:10-13 (ESV)

Nehemiah realised all of that about Shemaiah, and discerned his real motives, despite the fact that he was a fellow Jew and purported to be a friend. He ought, on the face of it, to have been trustworthy. But Nehemiah, being a discerning person, did not rely on appearances.

Therefore, we need to be able to know the real nature of the situation we are in and the real nature and motives of the person we are dealing with. We must not to go through life taking random chances and just hoping for the best. God commands us to learn how to be a discerning person and He has also given us what we need in order to become one.

We need to saturate ourselves in the Bible so that we have a sound knowledge and understanding of it. But we also need the gift of the *discerning of spirits*. Or you could call it the ability to *distinguish between spirits*. That is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit which Apostle Paul tells us about:

⁸For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues.

1 Corinthians 12:8-10 (NASB)

We therefore need *both* the Bible *and* the gifts of the Holy Spirit (See chapter 17 in Book One). Sadly, very many of Christians in the West have neither. Or, at most, they only have one. Their denominational traditions ignore, or even oppose, either the Scriptures, or the gifts of the Holy Spirit, or both. Many evangelicals, including those from a Reformed background, honour the Bible, up to a point. But they are often wary and suspicious about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Conversely, many Charismatics accept the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but neglect the Bible.

The Fear of God

I could have put this first in the list of ingredients of wisdom, because the Bible describes the *fear of God*, or the *fear of the LORD*, as the vital first requirement that we need if we are to become wise. That's because if we don't respect God properly we will not give either Him, or His Word, the devoted attention that we need to give. It is not an exaggeration to say that we must *fear* God. Neither is it just poetic language. That really is what God means, because nothing less than fear will produce the right attitude in us. Note what Job has to say about this:

***And he said to man,
'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;
and to depart from evil is understanding.'***
Job 28:28 (RSV)

The Psalmist also tells us that even the mountains, seas and rivers, and the very Earth itself, fear God and tremble because of Him:

***⁵Why was it, sea, that you fled?
Why, Jordan, did you turn back?
⁶Why, mountains, did you leap like rams,
you hills, like lambs?
⁷Tremble, earth, at the presence of the Lord,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,***
Psalm 114:5-7 (NIV)

Likewise, the Psalmist himself felt fear towards God and His judgment and towards His Word in particular:

***My flesh trembles for fear of you,
and I am afraid of your judgments.***
Psalm 119:120 (ESV)

***Rulers persecute me without cause,
but my heart trembles at your word.***
Psalm 119:161 (NIV)

Mere respect alone is not enough. There must be genuine reverence and awe. King David literally feared God. It was not just metaphorical. He actually feared God's judgment coming upon him. We see an example of that fear after Uzzah was struck dead by God for having put out his hand to touch the Ark of the Covenant, which he ought not to have done:

⁹ And when they came to the threshing floor of Chidon, Uzzah put out his hand to take hold of the ark, for the oxen stumbled. ¹⁰ And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and he struck him down because he put out his hand to the ark, and he died there before God.

1 Chronicles 13:9-10 (ESV)

¹² And David was afraid of God that day, and he said, "How can I bring the ark of God home to me?" ¹³ So David did not take the ark home into the city of David, but took it aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite.

1 Chronicles 13:12-13 (ESV)

Another example of King David having a literal fear of God was when he and others saw the angel of the LORD at the site of the threshing floor of Ornan:

¹⁴ So the LORD sent a pestilence on Israel, and 70,000 men of Israel fell. ¹⁵ And God sent the angel to Jerusalem to destroy it, but as he was about to destroy it, the LORD saw, and he relented from the calamity. And he said to the angel who was working destruction, "It is enough; now stay your hand." And the angel of the LORD was standing by the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. ¹⁶ And David lifted his eyes and saw the angel of the LORD standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces.

1 Chronicles 21:14-16 (ESV)

²⁸ At that time, when David saw that the LORD had answered him at the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite, he sacrificed there. ²⁹ For the tabernacle of the LORD, which Moses had made in the wilderness, and the altar of burnt offering were at that time in the high place at Gibeon, ³⁰ but David could not go before it to inquire of God, for he was afraid of the sword of the angel of the LORD.

1 Chronicles 21:28-30 (ESV)

Consider also the attitude that Job had. He feared God greatly and yet God described him in glowing terms, saying:

And the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?"

Job 1:8 (RSV)

Even so, this is how Job described his own fear towards God:

*¹⁵ Therefore I am terrified at his presence;
when I consider, I am in dread of him.*

*¹⁶ God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me;*

Job 23:15-16 (RSV)

We also see a clear picture of how awesome God is, and of the fear that is generated by meeting Him, when we see how apostle John reacts when he sees Jesus, face to face, in all His glory. John is terrified and falls down on the floor in front of Him. John does so even though, during Jesus' ministry on Earth, he was Jesus' best friend:

¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; ¹⁴ his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; ¹⁶ in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.

Revelation 1:12-18 (RSV)

Ezekiel reacted in a very similar way when he saw God:

²⁶ And above the firmament over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness as it were of a human form. ²⁷ And upward from what had the appearance of his loins I saw as it were gleaming bronze, like the appearance of fire enclosed round about; and downward from what had the appearance of his loins I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness round about him. ²⁸ Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about.

Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

Ezekiel 1:26-28 (RSV)

The Israelites also felt real fear when God descended upon Mount Sinai with much thunder and lightning:

¹⁶ On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God; and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ And Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. ¹⁹ And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. ²⁰ And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

Exodus 19:16-20 (RSV)

What the Israelites saw and heard was so awe-inspiring they feared that God might be going to kill them. Moses told them that God was not going to kill them. However, he said that they should, nonetheless, continue to fear God and that that fear of God would keep them from sinning:

¹⁸ Now when all the people perceived the thunderings and the lightnings and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled; and they stood afar off, ¹⁹ and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die." ²⁰ And Moses said to the people, "Do not fear; for God has come to prove you, and that the fear of him may be before your eyes, that you may not sin."

Exodus 20:18-20 (RSV)

You can't have genuine reverence of the type we are commanded to have unless we also feel a real sense of fear towards God. That fear arises out of our awareness of His holiness, His righteousness and, above all, His impending judgment. It is my feeling of apprehension about the prospect of that judgment which causes me to fear God most.

Moreover, when I say that, I am referring to the Judgment Seat of Christ, not the Great White Throne. (See Book Four). Consider this brief selection of verses which indicate how strongly and frequently the Bible emphasises this theme of fearing God. I could have added very many more passages:

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
Proverbs 1:7 (a) (NASB)*

*⁷Do not be wise in your own eyes;
Fear the LORD and turn away from evil.
⁸It will be healing to your body
And refreshment to your bones.
Proverbs 3:7-8 (NASB)*

*But the Lord of hosts, him you shall regard as holy;
let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.
Isaiah 8:13 (RSV)*

*“The fear of the LORD is to hate evil;
Pride and arrogance and the evil way
And the perverted mouth, I hate.
Proverbs 8:13 (NASB)*

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.
Proverbs 9:10 (NASB)*

*The Lord confides in those who fear him;
he makes his covenant known to them..
Psalm 25:14 (NIV)*

*Better is a little with the fear of the LORD
Than great treasure and turmoil with it.
Proverbs 15:16 (NASB)*

*As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
Psalm 103:13 (ESV)*

*The fear of the LORD is the instruction for wisdom,
And before honour comes humility.
Proverbs 15:33 (NASB)*

*The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
Psalm 34:7 (ESV)*

*"...and by the fear of the LORD one keeps away from evil.
Proverbs 16:6 (b) (NASB)*

*¹⁸Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,
¹⁹that he may deliver their soul from death
and keep them alive in famine.
Psalm 33:18-19 (ESV)*

***Do not let your heart envy sinners,
But live in the fear of the LORD always.
Proverbs 23:17 (NASB)***

***Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints,
or those who fear him have no lack!
Psalm 34:9 (ESV)***

***he will bless those who fear the Lord,
both small and great.
Psalm 115:13 (RSV)***

***The fear of man brings a snare,
But he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted.
Proverbs 29:25 (NASB)***

Note also this very stark passage from Psalm 2 in which Jesus Christ, the Son of God is described. It makes it clear why we should fear Him. Observe how frank it is about His severity towards those with whom He will deal when He operates as King and Judge of the earth:

***“As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.”
⁷ I will tell of the decree:
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.
⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
⁹ You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.”
¹⁰ Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.
¹² Kiss the Son,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.
Psalm 2:6-12 (ESV)***

You might be wondering why the fear of the LORD should produce all these benefits and make so much difference in our lives. There are a number of reasons why it does:

- a) It causes us to give far greater honour to God's Word and also to study it more closely.
- b) It gives us a good reason and a motivation to resist peer pressure. In other words, the fear of other people is outweighed, or displaced, by the fear of the LORD. We are therefore more likely to end up doing what God wants rather than what public opinion dictates.
- c) It keeps us from sin and motivates us to holy living, especially when we focus on God's judgment.

Therefore, contrary to what many people assume, those who fear God will actually end up closer to Him, not farther away. They will also have their wisdom increased:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;

*a good understanding have all those who practice it.
His praise endures for ever!*

Psalm 111:10 (RSV)

Moreover, God will reveal the secrets of His plans and intentions to those who fear Him:

*The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him,
And He will make them know His covenant.*

Psalm 25:14 (NASB)

The fear of the LORD therefore helps us to become wise. That being so, start to focus on the fact that judgment is coming. Meditate on the reality of that and ask God to make the prospect of it ever more real to you. You might wish to consider the following verses to start with, but go on from there and make the subject of judgment a lifelong study:

⁹Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment

Ecclesiastes 11:9 (RSV)

¹³The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. ¹⁴For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (RSV)

³Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? ⁵But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

⁶He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹For God shows no partiality.

Romans 2:3-11 (ESV)

¹⁰You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.' "¹²So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Romans 14:10-12 (RSV)

⁹So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

2 Corinthians 5:9-10 (RSV)

⁵Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God.

1 Corinthians 4:5 (RSV)

Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Hebrews 4:13 (NIV)

For nothing is hid that shall not be made manifest, nor anything secret that shall not be known and come to light.

Luke 8:17 (RSV)

But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment.

Matthew 12:36 (NASB)

For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done.

Matthew 16:27 (RSV)

Even when they don't have knowledge or understanding, wise people are guided by their integrity

No matter how mature and knowledgeable you may become, you will never have enough knowledge and understanding to be able to handle every situation, such that you always know what to do and how to handle people or issues. Some circumstances can be so complex and thorny that you can be baffled, because there is no way forward that does not create problems of one kind or another.

At such times you can be guided by your integrity or in other words, by your conscience. That may sometimes involve asking yourself whether a certain option or route *feels* right, because the situation is so complex that *in your mind* you just don't know what to do. You therefore let your integrity guide you:

*The integrity of the upright guides them,
but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them.*

Proverbs 11:3 (RSV)

Our integrity or righteousness is like a lamp which lights up our path and shows us the way to go. Conversely, the wicked have to walk in darkness:

¹⁸ *But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.*

¹⁹ *The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know over what they stumble.*

Proverbs 4:18-19 (RSV)

Our honesty will also make life's choices simpler and clearer. By refusing to allow ourselves to be diverted onto any dishonest course we are kept on the straight and narrow road which God wants us to be on:

²⁴ *Put away from you crooked speech,
and put devious talk far from you.*

²⁵ *Let your eyes look directly forward,
and your gaze be straight before you.*

²⁶ *Take heed to the path of your feet,
then all your ways will be sure.*

²⁷ *Do not swerve to the right or to the left;*

turn your foot away from evil.
Proverbs 4:24-27 (RSV)

The righteousness of the blameless keeps his way straight,
but the wicked falls by his own wickedness.
Proverbs 11:5 (RSV)

Integrity will also guard and protect us. That is partly because it will lead us to make right choices and avoid the wrong ones. But it is also because God will personally intervene to protect those who walk in integrity:

⁷ *he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;*
he is a shield to those who walk in integrity,
⁸ *guarding the paths of justice*
and preserving the way of his saints.
⁹ *Then you will understand righteousness and justice*
and equity, every good path;
¹⁰ *for wisdom will come into your heart,*
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;
¹¹ *discretion will watch over you;*
understanding will guard you;
¹² *delivering you from the way of evil,*
from men of perverted speech,
Proverbs 2:7-12 (RSV)

²¹ *For the upright will inhabit the land,*
and men of integrity will remain in it;
²² *but the wicked will be cut off from the land,*
and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.
Proverbs 2:21-22 (RSV)

Righteousness guards him whose way is upright,
but sin overthrows the wicked.
Proverbs 13:6 (RSV)

He who walks in integrity walks securely,
but he who perverts his ways will be found out.
Proverbs 10:9 (RSV)

The Lord is a stronghold to him whose way is upright,
but destruction to evildoers.
Proverbs 10:29 (RSV)

There are times when, with your mind, you are incapable of working out what is for the best. Yet, if you face each option in turn and ask yourself how it feels to you and whether your *conscience is comfortable* with it, you will often get your answer. Your conscience is a reliable guide and it operates when all your other resources have been used up, or are inadequate. Your conscience can operate beyond the range of your understanding. God can speak to your conscience through your spirit. You can then process things which your mind doesn't know about, or can't yet grasp.

By putting God first, maintaining your integrity and listening to your conscience, you will find that God will make your path straight, even when you are out of your depth or feel confused or unsure:

⁵ *Trust in the Lord with all your heart,*
and do not rely on your own insight.

⁶ *In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.*
⁷ *Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.*
Proverbs 3:5-7 (RSV)

So, there might be a business proposal, a job offer, or a possible relationship. It may seem to offer exciting opportunities and you can't *think* of any reason why you shouldn't do it. Yet it doesn't *feel* right. When that is the case make sure you listen and take note and do what your conscience says. Don't ignore it or override it. On the contrary, learn to use your conscience and to welcome its interventions. The more you listen to it, the more it will speak to you, and vice versa.

The use of your conscience can make available to you a whole new dimension of guidance, which can go beyond whatever your current level of knowledge and understanding may be. Given that those things will never be complete, at least until after we die, then this is a resource which we cannot afford to waste.

However, your conscience will not be of much use to you unless you *force yourself to listen to it*. An opportunity may present itself to you which seems attractive and profitable, but is not what God wants you to do. All sorts of reasons will then spring to mind as to why you should do it. Your sinful flesh nature will have plenty to say in support of the idea and will make sure its voice is heard. Also the demons in your life will whisper their approval of the idea. Likewise, worldly people all around you will advise in favour of it.

At such times it may be that amongst all of that noise, the only voice speaking against the proposal is your conscience. It is very easy to find reasons and arguments in support of taking the opportunity that has arisen. Such thoughts will come crowding in. But you must learn how to pause and pray along these lines:

"Lord, this opportunity seems attractive to me. However, please speak clearly to me, through my conscience, as to whether it is actually right. Let me know whether it is what you want and help me not to drown out your voice with my own preferences and arguments".

Our sinful, flesh nature is so strong, and we are so used to being guided by it, that it is easy to persuade yourself that any attractive or profitable venture is the right option for you. That is why most of us opt for such things so quickly with little, if any, internal debate. But train yourself to pause and interrogate yourself robustly and to pray as above. Then you are much more likely to hear the quiet voice of your conscience.

I would actually go further though and pray something along these lines. Indeed, I would pray this prayer even if I already think that it is right to go ahead with some opportunity or proposal:

"Lord, I have tried to listen to my conscience and I think I should go ahead with this idea/opportunity/proposal. However, if that is not your will, and I have somehow got this wrong, would you please intervene and stop me or stop the idea/opportunity from going ahead. Please block my path if I am doing the wrong thing here."

Such a prayer is of great value and will please God. It should be used even if you have already made a genuine attempt to listen to your conscience. It serves as a valuable supplement or safety net. However it is not valid to pray this prayer *instead* of listening to your conscience. God is not honoured by that approach. It should be prayed *in addition* to listening closely to your conscience.

Subject to emphasising that point, I have found this second prayer to be of great value. God has answered it and blocked my path many times. That has prevented me from suffering the consequences of making wrong choices. I have needed God to 'intervene' in this way even where I

have done my best to use all of my knowledge and understanding and have tried to listen to my conscience.

I have not always been pleased while He was blocking my path, but I have always been grateful for it later, when the facts and reasons have become clearer. In this way God has delivered me from many bad situations, simply because I was guided by my sense of right and wrong and was willing to let God have His way. His Word says that we will be delivered or rescued in this way:

***He who walks in integrity will be delivered,
but he who is perverse in his ways will fall into a pit.
Proverbs 28:18 (RSV)***

In the longer term a person who fears the Lord will find that their lives become filled with all sorts of blessings and privileges. God will honour such a person in many different ways. Of course that does not mean that they can escape from all the pressures and trials that all disciples have to face. However, the person who fears the Lord will overcome those trials and will be blessed by God, even while he is going through them. Consider these psalms which set out some of the many advantages that will come to a person who fears the Lord:

***¹Praise the Lord!
Blessed is the man who fears the Lord,
who greatly delights in his commandments!
² His descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.
³ Wealth and riches are in his house;
and his righteousness endures for ever.
⁴ Light rises in the darkness for the upright;
the Lord[a] is gracious, merciful, and righteous.
⁵ It is well with the man who deals generously and lends,
who conducts his affairs with justice.
⁶ For the righteous will never be moved;
he will be remembered for ever.
⁷ He is not afraid of evil tidings;
his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord.
⁸ His heart is steady, he will not be afraid,
until he sees his desire on his adversaries.
⁹ He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor;
his righteousness endures for ever;
his horn is exalted in honour.
¹⁰ The wicked man sees it and is angry;
he gnashes his teeth and melts away;
the desire of the wicked man comes to nought.
Psalm 112:1-10 (RSV)***

***¹ Blessed is every one who fears the Lord,
who walks in his ways!
² You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands;
you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you.
³ Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.
⁴ Lo, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.
Psalm 128:1-4 (RSV)***

The difference between God's wisdom and mere human wisdom

In his second letter to the Corinthians apostle Paul refers to “*earthly wisdom*”. He might equally have called it “*worldly wisdom*” or even “*carnal*” or “*fleshly wisdom*”. He contrasts this earthly wisdom with the way that he conducts himself:

For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience that we have behaved in the world, and still more toward you, with holiness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God.
2 Corinthians 1:12 (RSV)

Earthly or worldly wisdom is not actually wisdom at all. It is foolishness, or even wickedness. But it is what this lost and blind world regards as wisdom. It is largely about “*looking after number one*” and making sure that you get what you want from other people. It is also about self-promotion and self-preservation and has nothing to do with knowing or obeying God's will or serving His purposes.

So, it is the reverse of real wisdom. Yet it is all that this lost world has to offer. Such “wisdom” is not for us. In fact the very word is used ironically, because it is so far removed from the biblical definition of wisdom.

There is a huge difference between godly wisdom of the kind which God gives to us via the Bible and ordinary human wisdom which is based on men's ideas and experiences. Such human wisdom reflects the carnal, sinful thinking of this world rather than God's thinking. Therefore, even the best logic and reasoning that human beings have to offer is only foolishness in comparison to God's thinking and values, as set out in the Bible.

The beliefs and values of every philosopher and of every man-made religion are all worldly and futile. None of them will bring you to salvation or guide you into the truth. On the contrary, they will all lead you away from the truth. Apostle Paul writes in some detail about these issues in his first letter to the Corinthians. He explains why the gospel doesn't make any sense to worldly people and why it cannot be explained, or argued for, in terms of the so called wisdom of this world:

*¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. ¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,
“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.”*

²⁰ Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. ²⁶ For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; ²⁷ but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; ³¹ therefore, as it is written, “Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.”

1 Corinthians 1:17-31 (RSV)

Therefore, when Apostle Paul preached he never attempted to be impressive by using the fashionable and complicated jargon of secular philosophy or literature. In other words, he did not attempt to impress people with his academic credentials. He did not try to sound intellectual at all, as so many

people do try to do. Apostle Paul had no time for such pretensions. He stuck firmly to the truth of what the Bible says. Then he relied on the power of the Holy Spirit to convict people of the truth of it rather than relying on his own cleverness or persuasiveness:

When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. ⁶ Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But, as it is written,

*“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him,”*

¹⁰ God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For what person knows a man’s thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit. ¹⁴ The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ¹⁶ “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

1 Corinthians 2:1-16 (RSV)

Sadly, there are too many church leaders and writers who are trying to sound impressive or intellectual rather than simply telling the truth of what the Bible says as clearly as they can. I was reading a theology book recently and saw that the author referred to the gospel and letters written by apostle John as “*the Johannine corpus*”. He could just as easily have said “*John’s writings*”. However, I sensed that he did not feel that such a simple phrase would have impressed his readers. He appeared to be overly concerned to establish his academic credibility. Perhaps that was due to his own sense of insecurity and lack of confidence.

Ironically, the more truly intellectual a writer is, the less he feels the need to try to impress us by using big words or long sentences. Consider the writings of John Maynard Keynes. He had glittering credentials as a mathematician at Cambridge. He also knew himself to be one of the greatest economists in the world. Yet he used clear, simple, short sentences and very little maths or algebra.

C S Lewis was similar. He was an eminent authority in English Literature and a famous part-time theologian as well. Yet he deliberately wrote very simply and clearly, so that the greatest possible number of people could understand him.

Sadly, one frequently sees academic snobbery in churches too. I can think in particular of a large church which I used to go to in the past. It was in a prestigious university city and many of the members of the church or visitors to it were either students or lecturers. Many were medical doctors too. Consequently some of the preachers there would go out of their way to try to speak in what they imagined to be a sophisticated and complicated way, so as to impress those present. They were afraid of not being considered to be intellectual enough.

But why did they want to sound intellectual anyway? Why try to be impressive at all? Whom were they seeking to impress? It certainly wouldn’t impress God. He isn’t impressed by pseudo-

intellectual showing off, or showing off of any other kind. Our aim when we teach or preach should not be to impress anybody at all, but only to:

- a) be faithful to God's Word
- b) tell the truth
- c) be as accurate as possible
- d) be as clear as possible
- e) be as helpful as possible

If we are to do all of that then, as Paul found, it will sometimes be necessary to be willing to be considered a fool in the eyes of worldly people. That is what they will inevitably think of us if we preach the Word of God faithfully, without editing it or watering it down:

¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," ²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile."

1 Corinthians 3:18-20 (RSV)

For example, if you preach faithfully what the Bible says about creation and reject man-made ideas about evolution, then you will be considered simplistic and unsophisticated. You will be patronised, and even despised, by many people, including those within churches. The same will apply if you take seriously what the Bible says about demons and believe in their existence and their active involvement in our lives.

Many people in churches prefer to treat demons as myths and fables. They assume that what the Bible refers to as the activities and influence of demons was actually mental illness of one kind or another. They speak as if the writers of the Bible were incapable of distinguishing between brain injuries, mental illnesses and demonisation.

The eminent Cambridge don and Bible teacher, Derek Prince, got a lot of criticism and abuse. That was mainly because he took seriously what the Bible says about demons and the problems they cause, even in the lives of real Christians. Many people, including sincere friends, warned him that he was putting his academic reputation at risk, and making himself an object of ridicule, by speaking so openly about what the Bible says and by teaching that demons are actively involved in people's lives today. He was especially warned not to try to cast demons out of people, especially believers. They said it would make him look primitive and undignified, as well as arousing criticism.

But Derek Prince pressed on and refused to be silenced. He also refused to alter or tone down what the Bible clearly teaches. Having said all that, I should make clear that I do not agree with everything that Derek Prince taught about demonology, for example his approach to deliverance. However, I greatly admired his courage and integrity. He was willing to be a pioneer and to go it alone, teaching about things which few other people would even mention. Therefore he had no mentor and it was understandable that he would make some mistakes.

But Derek Prince was willing to go ahead anyway, because he was not trying to impress people. Therefore he could not be intimidated by the prospect of criticism, or even ridicule. I believe that one of the reasons why his teaching ministry was so enormously blessed and supported by God was because he only ever tried to please God, not men. We would all do well to follow his example in that regard.

The unrestrained pursuit of human logic, purely by itself, can lead you to some absurd conclusions and to adopt false, unbiblical beliefs.

Sound logic and reasoning are needed if we are to handle God's Word properly. They are God-given gifts. However if we rely upon logic and reasoning exclusively, or even excessively, then we can end up making some very bad mistakes. So, it is valid to draw appropriate inferences from a verse or passage. We can often deduce that if X is true then Y must also be true. There is a legitimate place for that kind of deductive thinking.

However we must not take it too far, or go about it in such a way that the logical conclusions we arrive at are allowed to prevail over other passages of Scripture, which expressly contradict what our own logic is telling us. Neither can we allow ourselves to use logic or deduction in such a way as to take us further than the Bible goes, or to make a point more strongly than the Bible states it.

A classic example of this kind of error is the way in which John Calvin and some of his followers allowed themselves to over-emphasise or exaggerate what the Bible has to say about the sovereignty of God. So, it is valid to say that God is in *overall charge* of the whole universe, and that nothing can happen unless He *allows it to happen*. It is also true that in various ways God *causes certain things to happen*. He intervenes, alters the course of history, appoints people to positions, remove others, and makes various other types of choices. All of those things are clearly true, *because the Bible says so*.

However, where many Calvinists go wrong is to over-emphasise what the Bible has to say about God's sovereignty and election. They then ignore, or tone down, *what the Bible also has to say* about our free will and our freedom to choose whether to obey God and whether to do His will.

Some Calvinists can therefore end up believing that if God is sovereign then absolutely everything that happens must be caused intentionally by Him, not merely permitted. By taking human logic too far they wrongly conclude that if it was possible for any of us to resist or refuse God's will in any way, then that would mean He was not genuinely sovereign. Their logic tells them that God's sovereignty must be absolute and complete. They also wrongly assume that the very concept of sovereignty is incompatible with there being any free choice at all on our part.

In doing all of this *they ignore what the Bible also says, very clearly, about man's free will*. That free will includes the freedom to choose to defy God and to disobey Him. Our doing so is all part of what God permits and it does not contradict or diminish His sovereignty. That's because what the Bible means by the concept of God's sovereignty is able to accommodate human free will. There is no inconsistency between these two concepts.

In his sovereignty, God has chosen to give us the freedom to make choices. Those choices are real, not imaginary or illusory. He really does give us the freedom to decide certain things for ourselves, even if that means defying Him and not doing His will.

Those who make this error about sovereignty can end up believing that absolutely everything that happens must be God's will, even sin. They believe that, whatever it may be, He not only allowed it to happen, but positively *caused* it. This extends to literally everything, including the mistakes that a secretary makes while typing.

Even those tiny errors are believed to have been ordained by God from eternity past and to have been deliberately caused to happen, and *even forced to happen*, by Him. Once you get to that stage it is hard to distinguish such thinking from the fatalism within Islam. For Muslims, everything that happens is said to be Allah's will and thus impossible to avoid, alter or resist. But that is not how the God of the Bible operates.

That kind of error comes when we allow our limited human reasoning to become over-extended, such that it takes us *beyond what God's Word says*. We can become blinded by our own man-made logic and the conclusions to which it leads us. Then we allow them to override any counter-balancing points which the Bible also makes. Instead of holding two doctrines in *healthy tension and believing both at the same time*, we tend to abandon one and then exaggerate the other.

Such human reasoning is not wisdom. It takes us away from the truth and obscures God's Word rather than illuminating it. We must therefore take great care to avoid such unbalanced or over-extended thinking and seek God's help to point out to us any areas where we may have fallen into such errors.

Our greatest faults are often just our greatest gifts or qualities being misused

If you ever take the time to really closely examine your own worst character failings or sins you may well find that they are your greatest gifts or qualities being misused. So, to give an obvious example, if you have the gift of a strong and muscular physique you could use that to bully and intimidate others.

Thus the strength that God gave you, with the intention that you should use it in His service, is being used, instead, to serve yourself. It then becomes a means by which you can sin. Therefore, the more strength God gives you the more effectively you can sin with it. Or if God gives you a very creative and imaginative mind you could use it to become a more effective and plausible liar.

Likewise, if God gives you the advantage of having a very bold, courageous heart you could use it to enable you to carry out major crimes or acts of violence. But you would never have dared to attempt such things if you had lacked that boldness or courage. The list could go on and on.

Your own giftings can also cause you to look down on others who do not have those particular gifts. For example, if God gave you the gift of a quick and decisive mind it could become the cause of you despising those who cannot think as quickly as you, or make decisions as fast as you can. So, if you did not have that gift you may well have avoided the sins of impatience and irritability.

If you were to examine any historical figure and look at their most significant failures or disasters the likelihood is you would find this principle in operation. Most of us don't attempt to do major things, or take risks, in areas where we are relatively weak or ungifted. We tend to do so only in areas where we know we have a comparative advantage. So, for example, Adolf Hitler had very strong gifts in the areas of lateral thinking, confidence, boldness and decisiveness. He also had an amazing memory for facts, and the courage to take risks.

He therefore made a number of very original, bold decisions which involved him overruling his Chiefs of Staff and military advisers. In the early years of World War Two, and in the years leading up to it, he amazed his generals when he consistently turned out to be right and his calculated risks paid off. Of course, in part, this was also because he was demonically guided. Yet it is also beyond doubt that he also had major personal giftings, which he was able to use to great effect.

But Hitler went wrong, and began to make some huge errors, when his confidence in his own undeniable giftings grew. It caused him to begin to overreach himself. He went too far, took ever greater risks, and listened less and less to his advisers. So, at least in part, he went wrong and failed in the end because of his misuse of, and over reliance upon, his own greatest qualities.

Have you ever wondered what great things Hitler could have achieved if he had employed his talents in pursuit of good rather than evil? He had exceptional God-given talents which were put into him to enable him to serve God's purposes. Instead, he used them for evil. But he could not have done even a fraction of that evil if he had not had those God-given giftings and strengths.

So, in your own life, it is almost certainly the case that you have done the most harm, and sinned the most, in those areas where you have the greatest natural abilities and talents. It is worth realising this because it may assist you in your efforts to change your ways and become more Christ-like. Instead of focusing only on our areas of relative weakness, where we lack natural giftings, we can begin to look as well at our areas of natural strength. Then we can ask ourselves some very probing questions about *how we are using those qualities*, for whose purposes, and at whose direction.

Moreover, it is in the areas of our greatest relative strength that we are most likely to rely on ourselves and act independently of God. Few of us will disobey God by doing something He has not called us to do if it means launching forth into some venture for which we know we are not qualified and have no giftings. But we might very well do so if we do have those strengths and are well aware of the fact.

Therefore we need to exercise the most restraint, and ask for God to restrain us the most, in those areas where we are at risk of relying on our own giftings. That is where we are most likely to do things that seem good to us, but which God never told us to do. The wiser we get, the more aware we will become of our own areas of weakness, but also of the even greater hazards that come from our strengths.

We will then give more time, thought and prayer to seeking to address the problems that our gifts and strengths can cause. We will also begin to ask God to hold us back in those areas of strength. That will prevent us from misusing those gifts or going our own way and using them contrary to God's purposes.