

CHAPTER 5

THE WISE

There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

Job 1:1 (ESV)

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

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

*Folly is a joy to him who lacks sense,
but a man of understanding walks straight ahead.
Proverbs 15:21 (ESV)*

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

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

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

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

Nobody is 100% wise, or 100% anything else

Nobody is ever 100% wise. Even those whom the Bible would classify as wise are not wise all the time, or in every aspect of their character or conduct. Therefore, in general terms, the wise are those people who:

- a) are genuine Christians - this is the first and most vital requirement, on which all the others depend
- b) fear God and take the Bible seriously - we cannot get any further up the wisdom scale if we don't
- 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) spend time with wise people and 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. They express different aspects of what it means to be wise. God sees this group 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)

*For you bless the righteous, O LORD;
you cover him with favor as with a shield.*

Psalm 5:12 (ESV)

*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.*

²⁰*The LORD preserves all who love him;
but all the wicked he will destroy.*

Psalm 145:18-20 (RSV)

*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)*

Wise people seek to acquire ever more knowledge and understanding of God and His Word by diligently and persistently studying the Bible and putting it into practice. Anyone prepared to do that, for a sufficiently long period, will inevitably become wise. In fact, even our natural cleverness or IQ will increase if we study 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.

At that time study of the Bible began to take place on a much wider basis in countries such as Britain, Holland, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Scandinavia and Switzerland (and later America). The growing knowledge of the Bible literally transformed 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. However, for the same reasons, the widespread abandonment of the Bible in recent decades has resulted in the catastrophic ‘dumbing down’ of our generation, which we are now witnessing.

What does wisdom consist of?

Let's look at just a few of the many passages from the book of Proverbs in which the general subject of wisdom is discussed. Note the various words used to define or illustrate what it is and what it consists of. Those are all needed because wisdom is a multi-faceted thing:

¹*The proverbs of Solomon,
son of David, king of Israel:*
²*To 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)

¹*My 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.*

⁴*So you will find favour and good success
in the sight of God and man.*

⁵*Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.*

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.*

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 are mentioned again and again, whenever the Bible speaks about what wisdom is. The word *wisdom* is an umbrella term and is made up of all of these seven ingredients or factors combined. Let us therefore examine each word in turn and attempt to define them.

Knowledge

By this we mean factual information of almost every kind, particularly knowledge of what the Bible says, from beginning to end, on every theme, issue, doctrine or point. The most important knowledge is of 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 then be in the right position to start to learn the truth about ourselves, especially in regard to our sin. We will also learn how to deal with other people and with the situations we face in life. Therefore, the Psalmist asked God to give him knowledge:

*Teach me good judgment and knowledge,
for I believe in your commandments.*

Psalms 119:66 (ESV)

The starting point is that we need knowledge of *what God says* on all these things, rather than what the unsaved world says, or our own opinions. I have always had an insatiable desire for knowledge and information. This intensified when I became a Christian. I studied the Bible and read huge numbers of books and commentaries. When older Christians saw me doing this some tried to put me down and advised me not to be so diligently studious. They even tried to quote apostle Paul in support of their argument, saying that "*knowledge puffs up*":

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 deflated by their remarks, which they probably intended me to be, because 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. They had a point, in one sense, as knowledge *by itself*, if not

accompanied by love, and the other ‘ingredients’ of wisdom, can cause a person to puff up with pride. However, the remedy for that is not to avoid knowledge, but to grow in love, and other aspects of wisdom, *in addition* to acquiring knowledge, not *instead of* doing so.

The way they spoke suggested that they saw knowledge and love as being mutually exclusive alternatives, as if we can choose to have either one, or the other, but not both. That is not what apostle Paul meant and he would be horrified at the idea of anybody taking him to mean that, or assuming 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 us to acquire it.

The point is simply that we are not meant to pursue knowledge *alone*, and then to stop there, without *also* seeking to develop many other qualities and features in our character. We obviously need other things in addition. Nevertheless, knowledge is the first ingredient which God gives us as He seeks to develop our wisdom. Therefore we have to begin there, as there is no other place to begin.

Understanding

Understanding is the next stage. It means to take that knowledge and to begin to absorb it more deeply because, in addition to knowing objective facts, we also need to see *why* those things are true, *how* they operate, and why they matter. In addition to that, it means having a grasp of the meaning, significance, and practical application of the information that we have learned about God, ourselves and others and then supplementing our knowledge with love and also with all the other fruit of the Holy Spirit.

We can then see facts, and also other people, in a deeper, wider, and more rounded context. Then the truths and principles that we learn from God’s Word, and also from our experience, will fit together better, make more sense, and be held in a proper balance. Moses speaks of how we can gain understanding from learning and obeying God’s commands. Therefore, *obeying* is an essential part of the process. We can’t get understanding by merely reading God’s Word, without putting it into practice:

⁵ See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶ Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’

Deuteronomy 4:5-6 (ESV)

So, obeying God’s commands will increase our understanding even if, to begin with, we have no desire to obey but do it solely by willpower and resolve. However, obedience leads to increased understanding, and as our understanding increases, so too will our willingness, and even our desire, to obey. The writer of Psalm 119 ended up with such a longing for understanding that he asked God for it, even though it is plain that he already had a great deal of understanding. That must be so, or he could not have written Psalm 119:

*Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.*

Psalms 119:34 (ESV)

Insight

Insight is a form of understanding, but one which operates in a more specific way. We will be given a *flash of inspired understanding* which enables us to take the knowledge and understanding that we have learned, and apply them to the particular situation or issue that we are dealing with. Or a person might suddenly see a deeper meaning to a particular verse in the Bible, or realise how it relates to some other verse. That may form a connection which reveals something else, or a deeper level of meaning.

One might also be given an insight into the nature of another person, or a difficulty that we face, or how best to approach them or it. I found that regularly in my work as a lawyer. There would be a problem, either for a client, or a colleague, and it seemed insoluble. Then I would suddenly get an insight or a flash of inspiration, which seemed to come from nowhere. It probably 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.

That insight then unlocks or solves the problem. However, insights can also be *given* to us because, in addition to those that we acquire through study, reflection and meditating on Scripture, 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, so as to 'join up the dots' and enable that person to understand a point more deeply, especially in relation to an issue or problem they are studying.

Another vital form of insight is where God gives us specific understanding of our own sinfulness or of deficiencies in our character, of which we were previously unaware. Indeed, we may well have been blind to it until now, but then God suddenly provides illumination, like a camera flash, which reveals the sin or fault and enables us to see it at last. This is a precious discovery and can enable us to begin to take steps to change. Therefore, we should keep asking God to give us such insights, and on a regular basis.

Discretion

Discretion involves having a sensitivity and awareness about whether, and also 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, speaking when it would have been wiser to say nothing, and saying nothing when it would have been wiser to speak? As we grow in discretion we make fewer mistakes and also 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 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 paraphrase of 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 take a particular approach or some other approach instead, which might even be the very opposite, depending on the circumstances of the case. We also need to consider whether to say or do that thing openly, or more quietly and discreetly. Discretion was something I used to lack. I had a

default-setting to speak frankly all the time, even when it was unwise to do so. I have a lot 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, a prudent person will delay taking action until the time is more suitable. Or he may even refrain from acting altogether. Solomon makes these observations:

*O simple ones, learn prudence;
O foolish men, pay attention.
Proverbs 8:5 (RSV)*

*The prudent sees danger and hides himself,
but the simple go on and suffer for it.
Proverbs 22:3 (ESV)*

*The vexation of a fool is known at once,
but the prudent man ignores an insult.
Proverbs 12:16 (RSV)*

¹⁵*The simple believes everything,
but the prudent gives thought to his steps.*
¹⁶*One who is wise is cautious and turns away from evil,
but a fool is reckless and careless.*
¹⁷*A man of quick temper acts foolishly,
and a man of evil devices is hated.*
¹⁸*The simple inherit folly,
but the prudent are crowned with knowledge.
Proverbs 14:15-18 (ESV)*

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 never have considered. Others, who lack this quality, may wrongly regard a prudent person as negative, or even obstructive, and be exasperated by them. Nevertheless, provided it is genuine prudence, and not mere pessimism or cynicism, it is a highly valuable quality and is one of the component parts of wisdom. As for how we get prudence, the main source is God's Word.

The Bible alerts us, ahead of time, to countless issues and hazards. It also warns us of various character-types and the kinds of people we are likely to meet, including fools and also the wicked. That enables us to be under no illusions about the nature of other people's hearts and what we can expect of them. That gives us general material to bear in mind as we ponder a specific situation. However, prudence also comes from living in close fellowship with God and hearing the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit, nudging and warning us about the dangers we face and difficulties that lie ahead.

Discernment

Discernment means the ability to tell the difference between two things which may look or sound similar, but are actually different. It also enables us to gauge the real nature of a person, situation, proposal or idea and to sense whether it is from God, men, or a demon. We are presented daily with

people, opportunities and proposals which may look good and claim to be good. But are they really? They could just be based on misguided human reasoning. You could even be being enticed 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 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 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 threats. But, each time, Nehemiah saw through them and refused to be intimidated or diverted from his task.

Then they sent Shemaiah, a supposedly friendly figure, and paid him to try to persuade Nehemiah to take shelter in the Temple. They wanted him to hide away rather than continue the rebuilding work. However, Nehemiah also saw through Shemaiah, just as he had 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. Nehemiah also realised that Shemaiah was trying to discredit his 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 discerned Shemaiah's real motives, despite the fact that he was a fellow Jew and purported to be a friend. He ought, therefore, on the face of it, to have been trustworthy. But Nehemiah did not rely on appearances and neither can you if you want to develop discernment. Like him, we need to be able to know the real facts of the situation we are in and the real nature and motives of the person we are dealing with. We cannot afford to go through life taking random chances and hoping for the best.

Discernment is not just a useful optional extra for those who want it. God *commands* us to develop it and has also given us what we need in order to do so. We therefore need to saturate ourselves in the Bible so that we have a sound knowledge of Scripture. But, in addition to that general form of discernment, which can be learned, we also need the gift of the *discerning of spirits*. Or you could call it the ability to *distinguish between spirits*, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, of which apostle Paul speaks:

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* thorough knowledge of the Bible *and* also to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit (See chapter 17 in Book 1). Sadly, many 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 honour the Bible, up to a point, but are wary of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Conversely, many Charismatics accept the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but neglect the Bible. Both of those approaches are incomplete and misguided.

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 Him, or His Word, the devoted attention that we need to give. It is no exaggeration therefore 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 says 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 says that the mountains, seas and rivers, and even the very Earth itself, fear God and tremble because of Him:

⁵ *Why was it, sea, that you fled?
Why, Jordan, did you turn back?*
⁶ *Why, mountains, did you leap like rams,
you hills, like lambs?*
⁷ *Tremble, 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 also 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 the Jebusite. This was a pre-appearance, in bodily form, of the *Son of God Himself*, the Second Person of the Trinity, also known as the angel of the LORD, which explains why David feared Him:

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 Job's attitude. He feared God greatly and yet God did not disapprove of that fear or consider it inappropriate or excessive. On the contrary, He described Job, and his fear, 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)

This is how Job described his own fear towards God, even using words like 'terrified' and 'dread' to express it:

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 get a glimpse at how awesome God is, and of the fear generated by meeting Him, by seeing how apostle John reacts when he sees Jesus, face to face, in all His glory. John is so terrified he falls on the floor in front of Him, even though, during Jesus' earthly ministry, 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, i.e. a bodily pre-appearance by the Son of God, centuries before His incarnation as Jesus:

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 that day was so awe-inspiring they feared that God might be going to kill them. Moses told them that God was not going to do so, but that there was, nonetheless, benefit from fearing God because that fear 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)

There cannot be any genuine reverence without the fear of the LORD

We can't have genuine reverence unless we feel a real sense of fear towards God arising out of His holiness, His righteousness and, above all, His impending judgment. My apprehension at that prospect is what causes me to fear God most. When I say that, I am primarily referring to the Judgment Seat of Christ, not the Great White Throne. (See Book Four).

Consider this selection of verses which indicate how strongly, *and frequently*, the Bible emphasises this theme of fearing God and be aware that I could actually have added very many more:

*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)*

*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)*

*¹⁸ Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,
¹⁹ that 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)*

Note also this stark passage from Psalm 2 in which the Messiah is described. Many people wrongly imagine that Jesus is not to be feared, and that only the Father should be feared. That is absolutely wrong, and this passage shows why we should also fear Him. Observe how frank it is about His severity in the future, when He operates as the King and Judge of the whole Earth:

*⁶ "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)

How and why do we benefit from having the fear of the LORD?

You might wonder 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 greater honour to God's Word and to study it more closely.
- b) It gives us a stronger motivation, to resist peer pressure and the fear of other people is outweighed, or even completely 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 spurs us on 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, and 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 LORD confides in those who fear him;
he makes his covenant known to them.*

Psalm 25:14 (NIV)

In addition to all its other benefits, the fear of the LORD therefore helps us to become wise. That being so, a good place to start in cultivating that fear is to focus on the fact that His judgment is coming, as that is the main thing we need to fear. Think long and hard about the reality of that. In fact, ask God to make the prospect of His judgment ever more real and vivid 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:

*Be 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)

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

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (RSV)

³ *Do 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? ⁴ Or 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? ⁵ But 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.*

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

Romans 2:3-11 (ESV)

¹⁰ *You, 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. ¹¹ It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.' "¹² So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.*

Romans 14:10-12 (RSV)

Therefore 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)

⁹ *So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰ For 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)

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)

In the longer term, a person who fears the LORD will find that their life becomes filled with all sorts of blessings and privileges and God will honour them in many different ways. Of course, that does not mean they can escape from the pressures and trials that all disciples have to face. However, the person who fears the LORD will overcome those trials and 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 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)

Wise people are loyal, steadfast and faithful. They show courage, stick to their principles, and do their duty even when under pressure.

Most of the time we are not clever enough to be able to know exactly how to do our duty while, at the same time, entirely avoiding all risks and hazards. Sometimes that would not even be possible for King Solomon, or the prophet Daniel, as we see vividly illustrated by his being cast into the lions' den. However, one thing which is easier to see, provided you are looking for it, is what your *duty* is in a given situation, even where one cannot find any way to remove the risk. Duty is a broad concept and covers all of your many and varied obligations to:

- a) God, so as to obey all His commands, as set out in the Bible
- b) your family, with your greatest duty being owed to your wife or husband, then your children, then your parents, and then your wider family, in descending order

- c) the law of the land
- d) your employer
- e) your church
- f) your community

When faced with a difficult situation, decision or confrontation, where doing the right thing may be costly, or even dangerous, a faithful man will set his face to do that right thing, *regardless of what it means for him*. Sadly, such people are very rare, as Solomon says:

***Many a man proclaims his own loyalty,
but a faithful man who can find?
Proverbs 20:6 (RSV)***

Therefore, if you want to be wise, then be faithful. Do what is right, *even when you are afraid*, and even when you know it will cost you. Having the courage to force yourself to do what you know is right, even where doing it will be hard, is a vital part of wisdom. There is no use in knowing God's Word, and the many commands and principles it contains, if you do not choose to have the courage to implement them. Moreover, I say *choose* deliberately, because we can always summon up the courage we need, or ask God to give us more, provided we actually *want it*.

Most people who take the easy option and shirk their duty do so not because they do not have the courage, or cannot get it. It is because they do not *choose* to exercise it and do not *want* to ask God to give it to them. Therefore, make it your practice, starting with small things, to force yourself to do your duty and to be faithful to God's Word, and faithful to other people. Choose to have the courage to do the things that you know are right, even if you fear doing so. That way your 'courage muscle' will grow, ready to face even bigger tests ahead.

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 "*fleshy wisdom*". Paul 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)***

Likewise, Jesus' half-brother, James, contrasts 'earthly wisdom', which is "*unspiritual and demonic*" with the wisdom which comes from God. He says that is "*pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere*":

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

James 3:13-17 (ESV)

Earthly or worldly wisdom is not really wisdom at all. It is actually foolishness, or even wickedness. But it is what this lost and blind world misguidedly regards as wisdom. It is largely about "*looking*

after number one” and making sure you *get what you want from people*. It is also about self-promotion and self-preservation and has nothing at all to do with knowing or obeying God’s will or serving His purposes. So, it is actually the reverse of real wisdom, but it is all that this unsaved world has to offer. Therefore, that kind of ‘wisdom’ is not for us.

In fact, the very word is used ironically in the Bible, 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.

The beliefs and values of every philosopher, and of every man-made religion, are all futile. None of them will ever guide you into the truth. On the contrary, they will all lead you away from it. 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 in terms of the “*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 didn’t attempt to sound impressive by using the fashionable and complicated jargon of secular philosophy or literature. Neither did he attempt to impress people with his academic credentials. In fact, he did not try to sound intellectual at all, as so many preachers try to do today. 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:

¹ 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)

Too many church leaders are trying to sound intellectual, rather than being wise, but that can actually cause them to become foolish in God’s eyes

Too many church leaders and writers are trying to sound impressive or intellectual, rather than simply telling the truth of what the Bible says as clearly as they can. I read a theology book a while ago and 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*”, but I suspect that he did not feel that such a simple phrase would have impressed his readers. He appeared overly concerned to establish his academic credibility, probably due to his own feelings 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. John Maynard Keynes had glittering credentials as a mathematician at Cambridge and also knew himself to be one of the greatest economists in the world. Yet he wrote in clear, simple, short sentences and used very little maths or algebra to illustrate his points. C S Lewis was similar. He was an eminent authority on English Literature and also a famous part-time theologian. Yet he wrote very simply, so that the greatest possible number of ordinary people could understand him.

Sadly, one sees a lot of academic snobbery in churches. I can think of a big church I used to go to in a university city with a large teaching hospital. Many of the congregation were either students, lecturers or medical doctors. Some preachers went out of their way to try to speak in a sophisticated and complicated way, so as to be impressive. They were concerned about not being considered to be intellectual.

But why did they want to sound intellectual anyway? In fact, why try to be impressive in any other way? Whom were they seeking to impress? It certainly wouldn’t work with God. He isn’t impressed by pseudo-intellectualism, or by showing off of any other kind. Therefore, it was plainly the people in the congregation whose admiration they were craving for, not God’s approval. However, when we teach or preach it should never be our aim to impress anybody at all, but only to be:

- a) faithful to God’s Word
- b) truthful
- c) as accurate as possible
- d) as clear as possible

e) as helpful as possible

If we are to do all of the above then, as Paul found, it will 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, adding to 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)

If you reject evolution and preach what the Bible says about creation, you will be considered simplistic and unsophisticated and will be patronised, and despised, *even within churches*. The same will apply if you take seriously what the Bible says about demons and say openly that you believe in their existence and their active involvement in our lives. Many churches treat demons as myths and assume that what the Bible refers to was actually mental illness, as if the writers of the Bible were incapable of distinguishing between brain injuries, mental illnesses, and demonisation.

The Cambridge don (professor) and Bible-teacher, Derek Prince, got a lot of abuse 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 of his, warned him that he was putting his academic reputation at risk, and making himself an object of ridicule, by speaking so openly. They said he should avoid teaching about deliverance, or even saying that demons are actively involved in people's lives today.

He was especially warned not to actually cast demons out of people, especially believers, or it would make him look primitive and undignified, and arouse criticism. However, Derek Prince refused to be silenced or to alter, or tone down, what the Bible clearly teaches. Having said all that, I do not agree with everything Derek Prince taught about demonology, or his approach to deliverance. I differ from him on a few points, as I explain in Book 7. However, I agreed with him on many things and greatly admired his courage and integrity. He was willing to be a pioneer and to teach things which others feared even to mention.

However, because he was a pioneer, he had no mentor and it was, therefore, all the more understandable that he would make some mistakes. Nevertheless, Derek Prince was willing to go ahead anyway, regardless of what people thought of him, *because he was not trying to impress people*, but only to be faithful and to tell the truth. That being so, he could not be intimidated by criticism or ridicule. I believe that one of the reasons why his teaching ministry was so enormously blessed by God was because he only ever tried to please God, not men. We would all do well to follow his example in that.

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

Sound logic, reasoning and deduction are needed if we are to handle God's Word properly. Those are all God-given abilities. However, if we rely upon these excessively we can end up making some bad mistakes. So, it is valid to draw appropriate inferences from a passage and deduce that if X is true, then Y must also be true. There is a place for deductive thinking, but we must not take it too far, such that our logical conclusions are allowed to *prevail over passages of Scripture*, which expressly contradict them.

Neither can we allow our natural, human logic or deduction 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 John Calvin and some of his followers over-emphasised or exaggerated what the Bible says 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 says about God's sovereignty and election and to go further than it goes. In addition, they ignore, or tone down, *what the Bible also has to say* about our freedom to choose whether to obey God and whether to do His will.

Some Calvinists therefore end up believing that if God is sovereign, then absolutely everything that ever happens must be *caused* by Him, not merely permitted. By taking their fallible human logic too far they wrongly conclude that that must be so, because, 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', i.e. as they wrongly define that term. They also wrongly assume that the very concept of sovereignty, as they define it, is incompatible with there being any free choice at all on our part.

In doing all of this they not only wrongly define 'sovereignty', by basing its meaning on their own logic, rather than on what the Bible actually says. They also ignore what the Bible explicitly says, or clearly implies, about *man's freedom to choose*. That includes the freedom to defy God and to disobey Him. Our doing so is all part of what God permits and it does not actually contradict or diminish His sovereignty at all, when the word is defined biblically. 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 because, in His sovereignty, God has chosen to give us the *freedom to make choices* and those choices are real, not imaginary or illusory. He really does allow us to decide certain things for ourselves, *even if that means defying Him* and *not* doing His will. Those who make this error of exaggerating the meaning of sovereignty can end up believing that absolutely everything that happens must be God's will, even sin. They therefore believe that He not only allows things to happen, but positively *causes* them.

For the more extreme Calvinists, this assumption extends to literally everything, however trivial, including the mistakes 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* which is taught within Islam. For Muslims, everything that happens is said to be Allah's will and thus completely impossible to avoid, alter or resist.

But that is not how the God of the Bible operates and, more to the point, that is not how He describes Himself. That kind of theological 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 so persuaded by our own man-made logic that we are blinded by it and trapped by the conclusions to which it leads us. Then we allow those conclusions to override any counter-balancing points which the Bible also makes, many of which are expressly stated, and which are not based on any reasoning on our part.

Accordingly, instead of holding two valid biblical doctrines in *healthy tension and believing both at the same time*, as we are meant to, many of us underemphasise, or even abandon, one doctrine and exaggerate the other. Such reasoning is not wisdom. It takes us away from 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 also 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 closely examine your 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 physical strength that God meant you to use in His service, is being used, instead, to serve yourself. It then becomes a means by which you can sin and, 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 a naturally bold temperament you could use it to enable you to carry out major crimes, which you would never have dared to attempt if you had not been given that gift of boldness. The list could go on and on. Another problem is that 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 who cannot 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, because most of us don't attempt major things, or take substantial 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, boldness and decisiveness. He also had an amazing memory for facts and figures, and the ability to take calculated risks. He therefore made a number of highly original decisions which meant overruling his Chiefs of Staff. In the early years of World War Two, and the years leading up to it, he amazed his generals when he consistently turned out to be right and his gambles paid off.

Of course, in part, this was also because he was demonically guided. Yet it is beyond doubt that he also had major personal giftings, which he was able to use to great effect. However, Hitler went wrong, and began to make some huge errors, when his confidence in his own undeniable talents became too great. He began to overreach himself, 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 abilities 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, but he chose to use them for evil instead. He could not have done even a fraction of that evil if he had not got those giftings and strengths. So, in your own life, it is likely that you have done the most harm, and sinned the most, in those areas where you have the *greatest* natural abilities, not where you have the *least*.

Reflecting on this may help us to change our ways. 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 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 that He has not called us to do if it means launching forth into some venture for which we know we are not qualified. However, 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 self-control, and ask for God to restrain us the most, in those areas where we are most 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, if we are acting wrongly, and to prevent us from misusing those gifts or from going our own way.