

Exegetical Paper Number Two
Fear: It's of God and for the Righteous!
Review and Analysis of Proverbs 9:8b - 11

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Contents

Introduction 1

Structure 2

Fear 4

Defined 4

For Today 5

Wisdom 6

Righteousness 7

Conclusion 8

Bibliography 9

. . . *Reprove a wise man and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man and he will be still wiser, Teach a **righteous** man and he will increase his learning. The **fear** of the LORD is the beginning of **wisdom**, And the **knowledge** of the Holy One is **understanding**. For by me your days will be multiplied, And years of life will be added to you. —Proverbs 9:8b-11.*

Introduction

Fear is probably one of the most misunderstood concepts in our contemporary Christian culture. Largely untrained, its members imagine a variety of meanings and applications. Some prefer to transpose what should be a motivator accompanied by ‘trembling’ and response to a sterile and passive awe of God. Others believe that the “*fear of God*” is, likewise, a passive respect that diminishes God’s nature and humankind’s covenant with him. As we see in Proverbs 9:8b-11 and other related references, fear compels those walking in God’s ways to continually learn, grow, and apply what they’ve learned. I contend that a healthy fear that motivates the follower to study and *do* and the salvation the latter brings are interrelated. Sounds straightforward. But, if that’s true, why is the concept of fear so grossly misunderstood? Or missed altogether?

Experience suggests that the primary source of the misunderstanding of fear and resulting lack of action is ignorance of our covenantal roots and Old Testament theology. To support my contention (above) and in the spirit of equipping the Saints¹, we’ll begin our exploration by examining the structure of the referenced wisdom literature and then delving into related topics of fear, wisdom, and righteousness.

¹ Ephesians 4:11-13, New American Standard Bible (NASB).

Structure

The last part of Proverbs 9:8 sets the stage for fear and wisdom by linking wisdom and reproof (remember that God disciplines those he loves!)². Verse 9 ties instruction, learning and training together while associating a pursuit of wisdom and knowledge to righteousness. Verse 10 reveals that seeking the wisdom and knowledge of God introduced in verse 9 begins with the fear of the Lord of our covenant. Finally, verse 11 hints at the reward for the righteous who fear and, therefore, pursue wisdom and knowledge of [and from] him.³ What follows is a breakdown of verses 8b-11.

8b: *Reprove a wise man and he will love you.* In stark contrast to the fool of 8a, we begin to learn about the wise individual who appreciates the correction. We find similar admonishment for correction/discipline in the New Testament – by God and for those in covenant with him⁴.

9a: *Give instruction to a wise man and he will be still wiser.* The Implication here is that the wise person will seek instruction in the pursuit of wisdom.

9b: *Teach a righteous man and he will increase his learning.* This second half of verse 9 synonymously parallels the first by equating instruction to teaching, the wise person to the righteous, and increased learning to continued wisdom; the next verse reveals the motivation for that pursuit.

² Hebrews 12:5-6 (New American Standard Bible (NASB)).

³ e.g. Daniel 12:2-3; Matthew 25:31-40; 2Corinthians 5:10-11; Revelation 20:11-15 (NASB).

⁴ “*Rebuke is mentioned frequently in Proverbs as a helpful kind of verbal correction.*” (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 2 (909)).

10a: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* Fear is meant to motivate the pursuit of wisdom; no other start will work. “*One cannot gain knowledge of spiritual things if he begins at the wrong point, refusing to fear the Lord (i.e., to recognize God’s character and respond by revering, trusting, worshiping, obeying, and serving him.*”⁵

10b: *And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.* The second half of verse 10 synthetically parallels the first by adding that knowledge about God brings *understanding*. But toward what end? Verse 11 provides a clue.

11a: “*For by me your days will be multiplied*” Those who fear God and pursue an understanding of him will have a long life⁶.

11b: *And years of life will be added to you.* Synonymously parallel to the first half of this verse, this section reiterates that God will reward those engaged in the pursuit of wisdom and understanding.

That wisdom, knowledge, and understanding about God are related and motivated by ‘fear’ should be clear by now. But what is this fear? Why and how is it related to righteousness? How does it motivate those who seek God?

⁵ (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 2 (907-8).

⁶ Again, texts like these help illuminate the idea: Daniel 12:2-3; Matthew 25:31-40; 2Corinthians 5:10-11; Revelation 20:11-15, New American Standard Bible (NASB).

Fear

Our contemporary thinking that “*God is not of fear*” is often based on a single segment that, in context, represents cowardice in evangelism⁷. In the contexts of Paul’s teachings⁸, however, we learn that the fear of God is something different that relates to salvation⁹ and resembles the motivating alarm of the Old Testament fear that is the subject of this paper

Defined

The fear of God that leads to wisdom and salvation is the nominal form of Hebrew *Yir’a*, which inspires fear, is related to worship, and was imparted to God’s people “*in order that they might not sin.*”¹⁰ Related is *Yir’I*, which indicates ‘overawe’ and ‘alarm’¹¹ as we see in Psalm 25:12-14: “*Who is the man who fears the LORD? He will instruct him in the way he should choose. His soul will abide in prosperity, And his descendants will inherit the land. **The secret of the LORD is for those who fear Him, And He will make them know His covenant.***”

We learn from this reference that God will instruct the fearful in his covenant¹². Thus, fear motivated the faithful and resulted in wisdom. One may say that this instruction was good for Israel. But, what about today? Must *we* also fear in a way that may result in trembling and that motivates the God-fearer to pursue wisdom and knowledge of God and right action?

⁷ 2Timothy 1:7-8, New American Standard Bible (NASB).

⁸ e.g. 2Corinthians 7:15; Philippians 2:12, NASB.

⁹ 2Corinthians 5:10-11, NASB.

¹⁰ New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis (DOTTE), Volume 2 (527-33)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² i.e. The Shema of Deuteronomy, Law, etc.

For today

According to the writer of Ecclesiastes, we are to “*fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.*”¹³ Paul likewise admonishes Christ’s followers to obey out of a fear of God, confirmed by Marc A. Jolley:

*To fear God, then, is to be completely devoted to his will and its rewards while knowing the awesome consequences of not fearing him. This is the background to Paul’s injunction to the Philippians to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling [Philippians 2:12].”*¹⁴

Again, the idea of God-fearing along with its pursuits and rewards seems simple enough and is well-supported biblically. However, it’s foreign to most contemporary Christians focused on emotional instead of an actionable response to a God and covenant they likely don’t know or understand. As I alluded to initially, I believe a significant cause is ignorance of the nature of God and his covenant. Daniel Castelo in his article *The Fear of the Lord as Theological Method* offers insight into possible cultural and theological factors.

*Why do contemporary Christians have such difficulties with the notion of “fearing the Lord”? . . . Perhaps one of the most dangerous reasons has to do with the way Christians are ill-disposed to certain themes within their “Old” Testament.*¹⁵

¹³ Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, New American Standard Bible (NASB).

¹⁴ Eerdman’s Dictionary of the Bible, Marc A. Jolley on Fear (457).

¹⁵ The Fear of the Lord as Theological Method, Journal of Theological Interpretation, Volume 2 (2).

No clearer indication of this domestication of the biblical witness can be suggested than the avoidance of the “fear the Lord” as a prominent motif in the Bible. Fearing God does not fit well within acceptable norms today since part of the modern project has included the emancipation of fear and all other “tyrannical” dispositions in favor of freedom and liberty.¹⁶

Although the focus of this study is the fear of God, our Lord of the covenant, wisdom and righteousness are most certainly related. We’ve discovered in several passages that fear motivates the righteous to pursue wisdom and understanding of God. Therefore, we should briefly look at wisdom and righteousness and how they relate to the concept of God-fearing before we conclude this study.

Wisdom

As we’ve learned from the structure of Proverbs 9:9a and 10b, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom are related and lead to reward and salvation per the writer of Proverbs Chapter Nine and the Apostle Paul¹⁷. What follows is a brief explanation of these terms.

¹⁶ The Fear of the Lord as Theological Method, Journal of Theological Interpretation, Volume 2 (3).

¹⁷ e.g. 2Corinthians 5:10-11, New American Standard Bible (NASB).

- **Wisdom.** Hebrew *Hokma*, this nominal word describes skill and aptitude¹⁸. As we know from Daniel’s accounting, wisdom comes from God¹⁹ and its pursuit is motivated by fearing him. And, Proverbs 9:10 reveals that it, knowledge, and understanding are interrelated.
- **Knowledge.** Hebrew *Yd* represents ‘knowledge of insight; “*knowledge of God means a fullness of relationship with God and walking in his ways.*”²⁰
- **Understanding.** Hebrew *Bina* describes insight that comes from knowledge; “*genuine insight . . . and discernment are available to one who fears God.*”²¹

So, wisdom – knowledge and understanding of God – is sought by and given to the righteous. But who are they and what does righteousness have to do with the insight knowledge and understanding bring?

Righteousness

By definition²², the righteous are just and lawful. We’ve seen that by wisdom, they obey God’s commandments and are, therefore, rewarded with salvation to come at the end of this age. So, you could say that the righteous act ‘rightly’ per God’s covenant. We see supporting evidence in Rabbinical Literature:

¹⁸ G/K 2683, New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis (DOTTE), Volume 2 (130-4).

¹⁹ Daniel 2:16-23, New American Standard Bible (NASB).

²⁰ G/K 1981/3359, (DOTTE), Volume 2 (409-14).

²¹ G/K 1069, (DOTTE), Volume 1 (652-3).

²² G/K 7404, (DOTTE), Volume 3 (744-68).

Those who accept the covenant, which carries with it God's promise of salvation, accept also the obligation to obey the commandments given by God in connection with the covenant. One who accepts the covenant and remains within it is "righteous."²³

Conclusion

An incredible awe of God who will judge humankind justly and in his sovereignty should motivate us to learn about him and his ways and then move accordingly. The force behind the urge to *learn* and *do* is a healthy fear of God that comes through understanding – wisdom. That insight propels the righteous to continue living rightly in covenant with the God of wisdom, who rewards them with further understanding and a rescuing from his wrath to come. Thus, a fear of God leads to life for the righteous.

²³ Ibid., "cf. Przybylski (39-76)."

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