

# *The Fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom*

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Psalm 111; 1 Kings 3:1-14  
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What does it mean to 'live well'? How does one go about living a 'good life'? These are questions that occupy all of us, and they are exceedingly important for us to ponder. Because if we are not intentional about responding to them, we will likely take our cues and our direction from our society and try to live a good life according to society's norms and assumptions, which regularly default to the pursuit of money, intelligence, power, popularity, approval, and security as the markers of a good life. Society has tended to associate the good life with these things since biblical times.

When the Bible speaks of the good life, it characteristically speaks of the pursuit of *wisdom*, which is not the same thing as being intelligent. In the Bible, wisdom has to do with the discernment of the moral coherence to God's creation. This moral coherence is reflected in the book of Proverbs where deeds have consequences, where the universe is not a random place without moral order. According to biblical wisdom, we cannot simply act with impunity in the world, you will reap what you sow. Now there are other parts of the Bible that push back on this, that want to say that reality is more complex than this, and some consequences, especially suffering, is not always deserved. But the wisdom tradition wants to assert that there is a moral reliability to creation that must be honored.

Walter Brueggemann has said that to be wise means to bring 'one's life, conduct, and policy into coherence with that generative resolve for shalom.'<sup>1</sup> When we live our lives in congruence with God's purposes, things work better. So the question is how do we enter the path of wisdom?

King Solomon is a fascinating character in the wisdom traditions of the Bible. When we read the stories about Solomon closely, we can see that he both *embraces* the deepest claims of wisdom, and he *resists* the deepest claims of wisdom.

First, the embrace of wisdom. The understanding that I grew up with in Sunday school, and with which you may have grown up as well, is that Solomon is the virtual embodiment of biblical wisdom. There is the renowned story from the last part of 1 Kings 3 where King Solomon is presented with two women, each of whom claim to be the mother of a child. Solomon's job is to adjudicate who the true mother is. He

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "On Wisdom,"

[https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003ec2/on\\_scripture\\_walter\\_brueggemann\\_on\\_wisdom\\_proverbs\\_814\\_2231](https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003ec2/on_scripture_walter_brueggemann_on_wisdom_proverbs_814_2231).

shrewdly declares that the child should be cut in half, so that each woman could have part. One woman pleads with the king not to kill the child even if it means giving the child to the other woman; the second woman is satisfied with the split decision. Solomon immediately knows that the 1<sup>st</sup> woman is the true mother. Smart guy.

1 Kings 4:32 tells us that Solomon composed three thousand proverbs, and much of the book of Proverbs is attributed to him. He built a splendid temple for the Lord – which we will talk about next week – and offered glorious worship to God. The prayer in our text today is one great example of biblical prayer. In our text, Solomon unselfishly asks for wisdom and discernment, acknowledging his inexperience and need for God's help. "Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people," he prays, "able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this your great people?" Solomon speaks the language of wisdom.

But what we also see in the stories about Solomon is that he did not always practice what he preached. "Do as I say and not as I do" could have been a slogan for Solomon's life of biblical wisdom. He has his enemies murdered in 1 Kings 1 and 2; he enlists people in forced labor, which is to say, he *enslaves* them in the style of Pharaoh; he enters into marriage alliances with Pharaoh the king of Egypt; and he is enamored of material wealth, and I want you to see a couple of these texts. Flip with me to 1 Kings 10. Chapter 10 talks about the international commerce that Solomon pursued. Verse 14, "The weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was 666 talents of *gold*, besides that which came from the traders and the merchants, and the kings of Arabia. Solomon made 200 large shields of *gold*, 300 regular shields of *gold*. The king also made a great ivory throne, and overlaid it with the finest *gold*." Verse 21, All the King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold; none were of silver – it was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon." Gold, gold, gold. When you have that much gold in the royal palace, you may begin to suspect that alleviating poverty in the land is not the top priority.

We are also given elaborate descriptions of the wood he used for his palace in chapter 7. Flip back with me to 1 Kings 7, for a description of the royal palace. We read in verse 2 that "he built the House of the Forest of the Lebanon, built on four rows of *cedar* pillars, with *cedar* beams on the pillars. It was roofed with *cedar* on the forty-five rafters, fifteen in each row, which were on the pillars." In verse 7, we read that "He had the Hall of the Throne where he was to pronounce judgment, the Hall of Justice, covered with *cedar* from floor to floor." Now, if you will flip with me to Jeremiah 22, where Jeremiah is offering a prophetic critique of one of the later kings of Israel, who followed in Solomon's footsteps. Jeremiah 22:13, "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, 'I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,' and who cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar and painting it with vermilion. Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him."

According to the prophetic and the wisdom traditions of the Bible, the pursuit of gold and cedar and power and control does not a wise person make. Justice and righteousness and peace and mercy are the path of wisdom. What the stories of Solomon give us is a king who speaks eloquently and who could pray long, impressive prayers, whose speech is smooth and refined, but whose actions suggest a man whose heart has been captured by power and control and the need to be seen as number one.

How, then, do we find our way to the path of wisdom? This brings us at last to Psalm 111. Psalm 111 is a psalm of praise, concluding with a core biblical principle in verse 10: *'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.'* If we want to find our way to the path of wisdom, that path starts with what is called the 'fear of the Lord.'

What is essential to know about the fear-of-the-Lord is that there are two ways to fear the Lord; one way must be avoided, and one way is essential. We can see a very concise description of this in Exodus 20:20, where the Lord has just proclaimed the 10 Commandments on Mt. Sinai in a theophany of thunder and lightning, so that the people are scared to death. In verse 19, they say to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." They are terrified. Moses responds to them in verse 20: "Do not be afraid." Do not be scared of God. You must not be terrified of God so that you avoid God. Then he goes on to say, "For God has come to test you and *to put the fear of him upon you* so that you do not sin." You are not to be afraid, but you are to live in the fear of God. The fear-of-the-Lord is different from being so terrified of God that you stay away from God. When we practice the fear-of-the-Lord, we are doing something akin to having a proper respect for fire or for the ocean. If we are careless and foolish around these things, things can go badly. But if we respect them and relate to them properly, our lives will be enhanced by the warmth and the power of fire, and by the vastness of the ocean. These two ways of fear are very different. The first has to do with a kind of religious machismo that wants to threaten and bully people into obedient faith. But the second has to do with cultivating a life of reverence and awe and humble respect for the divine.

When we practice the fear-of-the-Lord, we will be putting God at the center of our lives. We will be continually mindful of God, we will focus our attention on God, we will seek God and God's kingdom first, and then all these other things will fall into place. We will follow the first commandment, and we will not have any other gods before the Lord; we will not chase after idols or after wealth or after popularity. We will seek God's will.

Fear-of-the-Lord is a life of reverence and humility. My wife Laura says that it means that we understand that we are not the center of the universe. It means that we understand that the universe has been designed to work with the principles of righteousness and justice. Solomon talked that talk, but he did not walk the walk.

Where in your life do you need to cultivate this deeper, humble, and reverent fear-of-the-Lord? Is there something about this concept that troubles you? How might God be calling you to practice greater reverence? These questions will lead you into the path of wisdom. To God and to God alone, be all the glory. Amen.