

# Wisdom and Knowledge

by [R.C. Sproul](#)

In college, I majored in philosophy. On the very first day of the very first course that I took in philosophy, the professor wrote the word *philosophy* on the chalkboard, then broke it down to show its etymological origin. The word comes from two Greek words, which is appropriate, for the Greeks are usually seen as the founding fathers of Western philosophy. The prefix *philo* comes from the Greek word *phileō*, which means “to love.” The root comes from the Greek word *sophia*, which means “wisdom.” So, the simple meaning of the term philosophy is “love of wisdom.”

When I came to understand this meaning, I assumed that by studying philosophy I would learn about wisdom in a practical sense. However, I soon discovered that Greek philosophy stressed abstract questions of metaphysics (the study of ultimate being or of ultimate reality) and epistemology (the study of the process by which human beings learn). It’s true that one of the subdivisions of philosophy is ethics, particularly the science of normative ethics — the principles of how we ought to live. That was certainly a concern of the ancient Greeks, particularly Socrates. But even Socrates was convinced that proper conduct, or right living, is intimately connected with right knowledge.

There is a section of the Old Testament known as the Wisdom Literature — the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. Here, we see a completely different philosophical emphasis, one that is based on the initial assumption of the Bible. Many people regard the assertion that there is one god over all creation as a late development in Greek philosophy. In a sense, it was the conclusion of their thought. But for the Jews, the assertion of God’s sovereignty was primary. The first line of the Old Testament says, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” ([Gen. 1:1](#)). Monotheism is not at the end of the trail; it is at the very beginning.

Genesis offers no argument or proof for the existence of God. One of the reasons for this is that the Jews were convinced that God had already done the job Himself: the heavens declared the glory of God ([Ps. 19:1](#)). The Jews were not concerned about whether there is a God but about what He is like: What is His name? What are His attributes? What is His character? The whole Old Testament focuses on God’s self-disclosure to His covenant people.

The Wisdom Literature makes a startling affirmation: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” ([Ps. 111:10](#); [Prov. 9:10](#)). For the Jews, wisdom meant a practical understanding of how to live a life that is pleasing to God. The pursuit of godliness was a central concern of the writers of the Wisdom Literature. They affirmed that the necessary condition for anyone to have true wisdom is a fear of the Lord.

Such fear is not terror or horror. As Martin Luther said, it is a filial fear, the fear of a child who is in awe of his father and doesn’t want to do anything that would violate his father and disrupt their loving relationship. In a word, this concept has to do with reverence, awe, and respect. When the writers of the Wisdom Literature say that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, they are saying that the absolute, essential starting point if you want to acquire true wisdom is reverence and adoration for God.

Showing a contrast, the psalmist tells us, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” ([Ps. 14:1a](#)). Wisdom is contrasted with foolishness. However, in the Hebrew literature, the term *fool* does not describe a person who lacks intelligence. To be foolish to the Jew is to be irreligious and godless. The fool is the person who has no reverence for God, and when you have no reverence for God, inevitably your life will show it.

The Wisdom Literature also makes a sharp distinction between wisdom and knowledge. A person can have unbounded knowledge and not have wisdom. But the reverse is not the case; no one can have wisdom if he does not have knowledge. The antiintellectual spirit of our times declares: “I don’t need to study. I don’t need to know the Bible. All I need is to have a personal relationship with Jesus.” That viewpoint is on a collision course with what the Wisdom Literature teaches. The purpose for learning the things of God is the acquisition of wisdom, and we cannot have wisdom without knowledge. Ignorance breeds foolishness, but true knowledge — the knowledge of God — leads to the wisdom that is more precious than rubies and pearls.

We want to be rich, successful, and comfortable, but we do not long for wisdom. Thus, we do not read the Scriptures, the supreme textbook of wisdom. This is foolishness. Let us pursue the knowledge of God through the Word of God, for in that way we will find wisdom to live lives that please Him.