

# Why Does Knowledge Require "the fear of the Lord"?

By Dave DeWitt

This is an analysis of

**Proverbs 1:7, *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge***

Thesis: The fear of the Lord is the only path to truth (the way things actually are).

Notice:

- **Proverbs 1:29**, ...*they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD.*
- **Proverbs 2:5**, *Then you will discern the fear of the LORD and discover the knowledge of God.*
- **Acts 9:31**, *So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord.*
- **Acts 13:16**, *"Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen..."*
- **2 Corinthians 5:11**, *Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men*

## Question:

If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, why can an atheist learn to drive a car, do algebra, or develop a computer program, without the fear of the Lord? Why are the Jews, in general and compared to most people groups, knowledgeable without a fear of the Lord? The liberal progressive world does not connect knowledge to the fear of the Lord. The high-tech world in which we live was invented, in a large part, by people who have no fear of the Lord, at all. So why, then, does the Bible claim that the fear of the Lord is necessary for knowledge? Most people would say Bill Gates and Anthony Fauci have a lot of knowledge. But Solomon says, NO, they don't.

**Observation:** The Bible clearly and consistently connects the fear of the Lord to both wisdom and knowledge. I can understand how wisdom is unattainable without the fear of the Lord, because wisdom is a skill for living with discernment, which, in the New Testament, includes an eternal perspective. Clearly, that requires the fear of the Lord. But this discussion is about knowledge not wisdom.

In the Bible, the fear of the Lord seems to be necessary for knowledge itself, and the Bible applies it to all knowledge. Solomon applied it to seemingly every area of life in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Also, God applied it to Job, using various areas of science in the natural world. Paul's prerequisite for those he spoke to in Pisidian Antioch was *you who fear God*.

If we are going to answer the question correctly, we need to ask: "What is fear?" "What is that fear when it is applied to the Lord?" "What is the beginning of knowledge?" "What is knowledge?" And finally, "Why is the fear of the Lord necessary for knowledge to begin?" Before I discuss my conclusions, I will attempt a summary definition of these words. [I have used the definitions in the BDB Abridged Lexicon, Strong's Greek Dictionary, Strong's Hebrew Dictionary, and the New Oxford American Dictionary.]

## What Is "FEAR"?

Biblically, fear is terror in the context of reverence. Fear includes terror, not just respect. If I give a gift to a professor whom I respect, I define what respect looks like. If I am running from a bear in the woods because of fear, it defines what fear looks like. If we do not have a fear of God, His commandments become options, kept on our terms.

Fear is terror but, in the context of God, it is not just terror by itself, such as running from a bear in the woods. That terror would not include reverence and piety. Fear, as it applies to God, is terror which comes from reverence. When Ezekiel had a glimpse of the throne of God, he fell on his face (Ezekiel 1:28). When Isaiah *saw the Lord sitting on a throne*, he said, 'Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am

*a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips'* (Isaiah 6:5). The Apostle John tells us that the 24 elders around the throne of God *fell down and worshipped* (Revelation 5:14). The very presence of God creates a reverence-induced fear.

## **Why Do We Need to FEAR THE LORD?**

**Answer:** We need to fear the Lord because we are sinners.

Notice: the fear of the Lord did not exist in Adam and Eve before the Fall. They only began to fear God when they were disobedient and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God told them,

**Genesis 2:16-17,** *'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.'*

It seems that Adam had no fear of God until he ate from that tree. Fear of the Lord is never a prerequisite for knowledge when there is no sin, as with Adam and Eve in the garden, good angels, the four living creatures around the throne, or Jesus. Jesus's knowledge did not require the fear of the Lord. It is our sin nature that creates the need for the fear of God, as an access to knowledge.

After he ate its fruit, the first thing Adam said to God was: *"I was afraid"* (Genesis 3:10 – the same word for the *fear* of God used throughout the Old Testament). After they ate from the tree,

**Genesis 3:22,** *Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil"* (the definition of morality, and the creation of conscience).

## **What about the Biblical Commands "do not fear" and "perfect love casts out fear"?**

All the commands to *not fear* in the Bible are about not fearing something other than God. The Bible never tells anyone to not fear God. For example, Jesus said,

**Matthew 10:28,** *"Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."*

The Apostle John wrote,

**1 John 4:18-19,** *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.*

The statement *perfect love casts out fear*, assumes there is first "fear" for perfect love to cast out. The perfect love John is talking about is in the context of fearing *punishment*. [The Greek word κωλυω (*kōluō*) means "punishment" or "torment" (Strong's Greek Dictionary)]. The default position for anyone, who realizes they are a sinner and facing a just God, is fear. You are only open to the gospel of salvation if you realize you are lost. The death of Christ on the cross delivered believers from *punishment* for their sin. Believers do not stop fearing God (Revelation 19:5), they stop fearing punishment.

## **What Is the BEGINNING (of knowledge)?**

The Hebrew word for *beginning* in Proverbs 1:7 means: "beginning, first thing, or principal thing."

It seems that Solomon is saying that the beginning of knowledge would be the first thing, or principal thing that needs to happen before knowledge is possible. Solomon is not saying that the fear of the Lord is all you need for knowledge, but that it starts there. The fear of the Lord is a **prerequisite** for any and all knowledge.

## **What Is the KNOWLEDGE that the Fear of the Lord Begins?**

Strong's Greek Dictionary defines the Greek word for "knowledge" as "recognition, i.e. (by implication) full discernment." **Information** is just a bunch of facts, which only become knowledge when we make some sort of sense out of them. If I tell you there are such things as Uglats, my information is just undiscernible data. But if you could examine an Uglat, you could say, "Oh, that's one of those." Our "recognition" via "discernment" turns information into knowledge.

## **A Definition**

**Secular Knowledge is a recognition of what we understand to be true (the way things actually are).**

**Biblically, knowledge is the recognition of the truth itself (the way things actually are).**

More specifically, true knowledge (biblical knowledge, what Solomon called “knowledge”) is the recognition (through understanding and discernment, using the logic we are born with) that something is true (the way things actually are) because it comes from the (general or special) revelation of God.

## **A Biblical Perspective of Knowledge**

**Job 38:1-2**, *Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without **knowledge**?”*

God gave Job a science quiz to show Job that he could not answer any of the questions. The point was (is)—all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, will end up being wrong if it does not come from the fear of God, because only God has all knowledge.

**Proverbs 2:6**, *For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.*

**Solomon** connected knowledge to that which is only obtainable *from His mouth*, which will only be sought by those who fear the Lord.

**Hosea 4:1, 6; 6:6**, *Listen to the word of the LORD, O sons of Israel, for the LORD has a case against the inhabitants of the land, because there is no faithfulness or kindness or **knowledge** of God in the land... My people are destroyed for lack of **knowledge**. Because you have rejected **knowledge**, I also will reject you from being My priest.*

**Hosea** told Israel they were to come to God with knowledge. For example, they were not to approach God with things like mysticism, magic, blind faith leaps, or even *sacrifice* and *burnt offerings*. They were to come to God with *the knowledge of God*.

**Romans 3:20; 10:2**, *...through the Law comes the **knowledge** of sin... For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with **knowledge**...*

**Paul** emphasized two things about knowledge:

- (1) Knowledge of God comes from the revelation of God, *through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.*
- (2) Even a zeal for God was not valuable without knowledge.

## **Five Conclusions about Proverbs 1:7,**

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge*

### **1. Knowledge, which begins with the fear of the Lord, always includes morality**

David said,

**Psalms 34:11-14**, *Come, you children, listen to me; I will **teach you the fear of the LORD**... Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.*

And remember, Jeremiah told us,

**Jeremiah 17:9**, *The heart is more deceitful than all else and is **desperately** sick; who can understand it?*

Paul discussed the moral sensitivity of

**2 Corinthians 7:1**, *perfecting holiness in the **fear** of God.*

Peter affirmed that *knowledge* must follow *moral excellence*

**2 Peter 1:5**, *supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, **knowledge**...*

In the secular mind, there is a disconnect between knowledge and morality. A scientist, university professor, or doctor of something-or-another is not considered to be lacking in knowledge when he is acting immorally. But the fear of God which leads to knowledge is always connected to morality.

For example, I can know how to drive my car (even with a humanitarian morality) without knowing the fear of the Lord. But, without the fear of the Lord, I cannot know if my driving is good. Driving cannot be disconnected from what I do with it. My driving ability (even obeying traffic laws and using driver courtesy) does not tell me if it is good to drive my car to get an abortion, or drive my car to buy illegal drugs, or to drive to meet someone I am committing adultery with. Only the knowledge of driving that begins with the fear of the Lord can determine that.

If I know engineering, without the fear of the Lord, I can use my skills to help a terrorist build a bomb. With our intelligence, we made an atomic bomb, that we are now afraid we will use to destroy one another. Technical knowledge of, say, an architect, doctor, lawyer, engineer, or computer programmer, are only real knowledge if connected to morality. For example, a doctor could have great surgical skills and use them to abort babies, illegally sell body parts, or take a bribe to favor certain people. Technical knowledge without morality may be like knowing how fast you are going, in a car headed for a cliff. If it does not come from someone pursuing *moral excellence*, do not trust it as being the knowledge of the way things actually are. We all know intelligent people whose lives are a disaster, because they do not have the morality which comes from the fear of the Lord.

## **2. Knowledge that begins with the fear of the Lord is not isolated expertise**

**Luke 11:52**, *“Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you yourselves did not enter, and you hindered those who were entering.”*

Jesus told the law experts, who thought they had a lot of knowledge, that they had actually *taken away the key of knowledge*. They were experts in religious detail without having a fear of God. I suggest that the *key* they had taken away is the fear of God, which comes from knowing God. What they thought was knowledge would include a multitude of details that Jesus said actually *hindered* knowledge. We can therefore conclude, knowing details which are true in a confined area of study, does not equal knowledge. These lawyers would be like a high school science teacher teaching evolution, the big bang theory, or global warming. They are trying to teach knowledge without the key of knowledge.

Speaking of both Jews and Greeks, Paul wrote,

**Romans 3:11, 18**, *There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God...There is no fear of God before their eyes.*

Biblically, knowledge is not isolated information of some particular part of the way things actually are, while ignoring the way other things actually are. Without the fear of God, you cannot have knowledge with a true perspective.

You have heard the old example of three blind men sent out to examine an elephant and give a description of an elephant. One encountered the elephant’s tail and said, “An elephant is like a rope.” Another came to a leg and reported, “An elephant is like a tree.” The third came upon the trunk and said, “An elephant is like a water hose.” It is a silly example, but the point is, one could examine an elephant’s tail for years making conclusions about its living cells, its muscles, its DNA make up, the nature of the hair (or fleas) growing on it, what it is used for, etc. That would be what the world calls knowledge but not the knowledge that comes from the fear of the Lord. Knowledge that begins with the fear of the Lord would understand the elephant’s tail in the context of the whole elephant.

When I fly my airplane on instruments, if I only focus on the air speed, I will know how fast I am going through the air, but I do not know anything else, like, for example, my speed over the ground, my altitude or direction of flight. If I could take the airspeed instrument apart and examine each of its parts, I would know a lot more about it. But it would not keep me on course or from crashing into the ground from ignoring my altimeter, heading indicator or GPS navigation. Biblically, knowledge is not expertise isolated from the whole truth, it is part of the whole truth, which only comes from God.

**Isaiah 55:8-9**, “*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,*” declares the LORD. “*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.*”

**1 Corinthians 13:12**, *For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.*

An atheist can hit upon the truth, the way things actually are, in a certain small confined area, as he would if he had the fear of the Lord, by applying reason to reality (the scientific method). But the atheist will run amuck before long, because he does not know the whole story. On the other hand, when we get a small piece of knowledge from the fear of God (through the Word of God), it is knowledge in the context of the way things actually are about everything. In order to know the truth about anything, we have to know the whole truth about everything pertaining to that thing.

Knowledge of the way things actually are is only possible with God, and only obtainable through the fear of God. As Paul exclaimed, *Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways* (Romans 11:33). Man, without the fear of God, probes into reality to discern bits and pieces of the knowledge about the universe around him. He learns some details, but since he can never get the whole picture, his knowledge is always partial, faulty, and will eventually lead him in the wrong direction. We have all heard the saying, “a little knowledge can be dangerous.” But, without the fear of the Lord, that’s all there is.

As I go about learning things, I will make some conclusions that contradict the Word of God. At that point, I need to ask myself if I am going to base my knowledge on my own understanding, or the fear of God (Proverbs 3:5). Best is to saturate my thinking with the character of God through the Word of God as I go about learning things. But that would require the fear of God, as a prerequisite.

### **3. Knowledge that begins with the fear of the Lord, is known by reason**

Knowledge of the way things actually are, comes from the revelation of God, and must be understood by reason. Thomas Aquinas said,

“A triune God can only be available through revelation, but only known through reason”  
(Summa Theologiae, A.D.1272).

There are two sources of revelation from God, usually called general revelation and special revelation. We get general revelation from nature (Romans 1) and our conscience (Romans 2). We get special revelation, specific verbal statements about the knowledge of the truth, from the Word of God (Psalm 119; Matthew 5:18; 2 Timothy 3:17). Both natural revelation and special revelation are “only known through reason.” Do not believe any supposed information which is not based in reason applied to reality.

### **4. Knowledge that begins with the fear of the Lord is truth, not science**

Knowledge that begins with the fear of the Lord does not change, because it is part of the way things actually are. Scientific knowledge continually changes. The new liberal progressive idea of “settled science” is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. If it is settled, it is not science. If it is science, it is not settled. The best way the secular world has to obtain knowledge is through the scientific method. Basically, it is reason (the laws of logic) applied to reality. Logic is applied to some observation, in our three-dimensional universe, to produce a hypothesis. With experimentation, that hypothesis is confirmed by others. It then stands as a scientific law, until it is challenged by a new observation examined by logic, which changes, or nullifies, the previous hypothesis. But real science, using the scientific method, can only lead to conclusions that must change when new information is examined logically. Here are a few conclusions which were at one time accepted as “science,” but are no longer thought to be true:

- The flat-earth theory
- The hollow-earth theory
- The geocentric universe theory, that the earth is the center of the universe

- The heliocentric universe theory, that the sun is the center of the universe
- Bloodletting, to enhance healing
- Tabula rasa, the idea that at birth the human mind is a blank sheet
- Spontaneous generation, the belief that life comes from non-living matter
- Scientific racism, a theory that humanity consists of physically superior or inferior races.
- Emission theory of vision—the belief that vision is caused by rays emanating from the eyes
- John Dalton’s model of the atom, a theory that atoms are indivisible and indestructible
- Alchemy, the theory that base metals can be converted to higher metals, such as lead to gold
- Astrology, the idea that movements in the heavenly bodies have an influence on human affairs

## **5. Knowledge that does not begin with the fear of the Lord, is vanity, striving after wind**

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon tells us that everything we do for life on earth, is vanity and striving after wind.

**Ecclesiastes 1:1**, *“Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “vanity of vanities, all is vanity”*

That includes all our knowledge.

**Ecclesiastes 1:18**, *Because in much wisdom there is much grief and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.*

That includes the pain of being aware of the suffering of life and that it ends in death.

**Ecclesiastes 1:14; 2:11**, *I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind... Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.*

That includes all our knowledge, plus the accomplishments and activities based on our knowledge.

Whatever I know, no matter how accurate or extensive it is, even if it helps humanity for many years to come, it only leads to futility, vanity, and striving after wind, here on earth, *under the sun*.

**Ecclesiastes 12:13-14**, *The conclusion, when all has been heard, is 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.*

Although it would be a logical consequence to the conclusion, *God will bring every act into judgment*, Solomon does not talk about eternal things or life after death. He sees any comfort, or pleasure we have here on earth, as only useful during our brief fleeting life of vanity (Ecclesiastes 9:9). But there is one thing, and only one thing, Solomon tells us we can do that has value, it is the same thing that is the beginning of knowledge, **the fear of God**.

## **Application: How Can I Discern Knowledge from Foolishness In Secular Information?**

1. If it does not begin with moral considerations, do not trust it to be the way things actually are.
2. Do not equate isolated expertise with knowledge of the way things actually are.
3. If it is not based in reason, do not accept it as knowledge of the way things actually are.
4. Do not equate science or “settled science” with the knowledge of the way things actually are.
5. Realize, all knowledge applied to life on earth, even if it could be complete knowledge, is vanity and striving after wind, except to fear God and keep His commandments.