

November 4, 2018  
Rick Myatt

TO COMPLETE THE JIGSAW PUZZLE  
Proverbs 9:10

This week I attempted to do something quite mundane at our house. I tried to change out a ceiling light fixture that Laurie has wanted changed for a couple of years. This is a routine task that the average person could probably accomplish in 20 minutes with little stress. On the positive side of the ledger I didn't electrocute myself. At least not yet. On the negative side, I did battle with that thing for well over 2 hours and was not able to complete the task. It stymied me. I could not get the thing to mount properly in the ceiling. It is wired up and works, but it's hanging there out of a hole in the ceiling. When I finally admitted I was hopelessly stuck I looked at that thing hanging there and in disgust said, "Well, that's just awesome." Indeed, I am in awe. I'm in awe of the magnitude of my own ineptitude. Even if I say so myself, I humbly have to admit it is impressive. Dare I say, it approaches jaw dropping. It truly is awesome.

Fortunately, though I'm inept, at least I'm not stupid. Now that our son has been working as a doctor in emergency medicine since the middle of the year we have been hearing stories of some of the astounding actions of humans, the stupidity of which has landed them in the emergency department with serious, and sadly in a few cases even fatal injuries. Truly some of them are stupendous to the point of leaving me almost in disbelief. It is really awesome.

Things like that are negatively awesome, but there are some things that are truly awesome in the positive sense. Thursday Laurie and I were driving to go out to eat dinner. It was just after the sun had gone down. When he went over the hill to the west of our house we could see the view out to the ocean and the horizon. The sunset was literally indescribable. I suspect many of you saw it. The sky was lit a deep, brilliant, flaming red. If you saw a painting that looked like that sunset you would have said the artist overdid it, that it didn't look real. It was so spectacular it was breathtaking. We were in awe of the beauty of it for those few minutes, and even now the memory of it leaves me a bit in awe.

According to a recent article in *Psychology Today* University of Pennsylvania researchers had been looking into the concepts of awe and wonder. They said awe is, "a feeling of admiration and elevation in the face of something greater than the self." The article quoted a popular theoretical physicist who said, "Awe gives you an existential shock. You realize that you are hardwired to be a little selfish, but

you are also dependent upon something bigger than yourself.” Being in awe, he said, is a way “to remove the tyranny of the ego.”

There are a lot of things we can be in awe of. We can be in awe of the vastness of the universe. Sometimes when you look up at a dark night sky and see that impossible array of stars you sense awe. You can be in awe of beauty, like that recent sunset that we saw. But today I want to take about an awe that is so powerful it is life changing. I want to talk about having awe for God, an awe so powerful and deep that the Bible describes it as fear.

We’ve been talking about fear for the last couple of months. Today I want to pivot into a new series of sermons from the book of Proverbs that I call “Mastering Life,” for a reason you will see shortly. But this sermon is a crucial pivot point, for it also connects with the idea that we have considered that past couple of months of becoming fearless. Today I will be talking about the fear that sets us free from fear. The great writer Oswald Chambers, wrote, “The remarkable thing about fearing God is when you fear God you fear no one, nothing else. Whereas when you do not fear God, you fear everything else.” The implication of that statement is that we will be fearless to the degree that we fear God. The greater our fear of him the less we will be dominated by fear of other things and other people. The less we fear God, the more fear will control us. Today we will consider Proverbs 9:10, which directs our attention to the fear that enables us to conquer fear. The verse says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”

## WISDOM IS ABOUT MASTERING LIFE

The book of Proverbs is not a book you can easily study verse by verse or chapter by chapter. It is actually a collection of sayings. Probably if you were going to create such a collection today you would group the sayings into various topics. The ancient Hebrews didn’t think like we do and so they didn’t organize these sayings as we would. So what you have in this book is sayings that kind of bounce randomly from one topic to another. If you try to do a contextual study of the book for the most part you are going to drive yourself crazy and end up more than a little frustrated. Because of this I am going to approach the book by discussing several topics that appear in the book rather than go through it verse by verse.

Much of this book was a collection from Solomon, who lived in the 10<sup>th</sup> century before Christ. But there were other contributors as well. So the book ended up being kind of a collection of collections of sayings. Of course, the main focus of

the book is wisdom for life. Every culture has proverbial sayings, including ours. Some familiar ones from our culture are: Where there's a will there's a way. Two wrongs don't make a right. The squeaky wheel gets the grease. We have quite a few in the poultry division, such as, "don't count your chickens before they hatch." Don't put all your eggs in one basket. The early bird catches the worm.

Proverbs are observations about the nature of life. They are not intended to be understood as ironclad statements about the way things always are in every instance or as promises to be claimed. They are intended to give us perspective on how life typically works. As a result they sometimes reflect the ambiguous nature of life.

Consider these two: "absence makes the heart grow fonder" and "out of sight, out of mind." One claims that being apart from a possible love interest makes one long for that loved person, while the other claims that being apart makes the love interest fade. They are directly contradictory. Which is true? Actually we have both of those sayings because absence can have either effect, and most of us have seen examples of both. In effect I think these two sayings probably state something true about absence as the test of how genuine a supposed love actually is. If it's real it gets stronger, if not it fades. Another example of this ambiguity is this pair, "Haste makes waste," and "He who hesitates is lost." One says if we act too quickly we will mess things up, but the other says if we don't act promptly we might well lose our opportunity to act at all. Once again, we've probably all experienced both of those principles at some point in life.

At times you will see this same ambiguity in Proverbs. For instance, Proverbs 26:4 says, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be just like him." Right, we have seen that when trying to reason with a fool. It's like wrestling with a pig. It just makes the pig mad and it gets you as dirty as the pig. But then verse 5 says, "answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes." That's the exact opposite of the previous saying. Well, which is it? Sometimes it's one and sometimes it's the other. But that's not very helpful! How do I know which one applies? Ah, that's a good question. The answer is you won't always know. These proverbs tell us that dealing with a fool is always difficult and usually is a lose lose situation no matter what you do.

This serves as a reminder that these proverbs, even though in the inspired word of God, are not intended as laws, rules or formulas, or as ironclad promises you can always claim. They are intended to strengthen and equip us to live wisely. If you

operate by these principles the odds are in your favor because this is how life works most of the time.

Living wisely is an important concept. The ancient Hebrews viewed wisdom rather differently than we do. Their view of wisdom had to do making life work the best it can, and that means making good moral choices and taking good actions. It was firmly grounded in the spiritual as we shall see.

Observe Proverbs 9:9. It says, “Instruct the wise and they will be wiser still; teach the righteous and they will add to their learning.” Many of the sayings in Proverbs are Hebrew poetry. Their poetry was not about rhyme and meter as much as it was about comparison or completion. Their poems involved couplets that would state the same idea two ways or have the second line complete the idea of the first. In verse 9 it is two statements of the same idea. The first line involves instructing, the second teaching, which is the same thing. The first line ends with “be wiser still,” the second with “add to their learning,” again, much the same. Now notice who was to be instructed. In the first line it was the wise, in the second it was the righteous. That’s because in Hebrew wisdom, *they were the same!* To be wise is to live righteously.

*The Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (vol. III, p. 1028) says that the Hebrew concept of wisdom was, “concerned generally with the sagacious behavior which enables a man to master life.” Now that statement sounds a bit tautologous to me because the word sagacious means wise. So that means Hebrew wisdom was about wise behavior which enables a man to master life. But there are two key ideas in the statement. One is that it has to do with behavior, so it is practical. The other is that it is about mastering life.

When you have mastered something it means that you can do it well. I learned Greek and Hebrew when I was in grad school. But I didn’t master Hebrew. I could never read, hear and speak it well. And in the decades since I took it my knowledge of the language has mostly gone the way of my high school German. I still have a nodding acquaintance with the language, but that’s all. Mastering something is very different than having an acquaintance with it.

What does it mean to master life? It means to become an expert at it. People who master life will get the most out of life. They will invest themselves in the things that really matter. They will treat other people with kindness and dignity. They will be people you would admire. They will have character and live in ways that would

make others wish they could be like them. They will live with purpose and peace and will bring blessing to others.

Another way to say one has mastered life is to say that person is a success. But we have to be very careful here. What do we mean when we mention success? In our culture it typically has to do with gaining status, possessions and power. But there are probably more examples of people who have gained that kind of success, but haven't really mastered life than those who have. There are lots of people who have "succeeded" if success is having power, position, status and wealth, who do not have peace, purpose, treat others with kindness, are admirable in their character and invest themselves in the things that really matter. Inevitably they will lack joy, peace and hope.

### MASTERING LIFE BEGINS WITH GOD

This verse states a very controversial claim. It asserts that if you are to master life, to have real wisdom, it starts with God. I remember Toby telling me years ago now about his experience taking the MCAT, the first of a number of gnarly tests he has had to take in his pursuit of becoming a doctor. That was a hugely important test because it weighed heavily on whether he could gain acceptance to a medical school. He told me the test got off to a rocky start. The first question was one of those multiple part kind of questions where each subsequent question built on the previous questions. The problem for him was he had prepared diligently for the test but this first question caught him off guard. He eventually worked through it, but later realized he made a mistake on the very first part of the question. This had a very unfortunate effect. Because everything else built on that first part of the question, every other part of the question was going to be wrong. If you start of a piece of logic with a faulty premise your logic will inevitably be errant.

This verse claims that's how life is. It starts with God. If we don't have him as our foundation, then everything else is going to be off. There are brilliant people in this world, people so much smarter than me that I look like a dimwit in comparison. I marvel at some of the astounding things that some of these people are able to figure out and do. But in many cases they do not start with God. Often he doesn't figure into their thinking at all. The result of this is that they don't really master life. They don't have the meaning, fullness, peace and joy that God intends for them. They don't treat others with kindness in all cases. The problem is they haven't laid the foundation properly, so even though they have built remarkable things, it ends up falling far short of what they could have had.

Jacques Monod, Nobel prize winning French biochemist, wrote, “The ancient covenant is in pieces; man at last knows that he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe, out of which he emerged only by chance.” If we emerged only by chance then our lives have zero meaning. Writer D. H. Lawrence wrote, “Nothingness! To accept the great nothingness of life seems to be the one end of living. All the many busy and important little things that make up the grand sum total of nothingness.” He claimed that everything we do is nothing. There is no point to anything we do. If that’s true, why should we even try to do anything? What’s the point? Does living like that sound like mastering life to you? It doesn’t to me. But if you don’t start with God, that is where you inevitably must end. Life really doesn’t mean anything.

When life is like that it becomes unbearable. Viktor Frankl survived the horror of a Nazi death camp. In his book, *Man’s Search For Meaning* he related some of the stories of that horrifying experience. The brutality was beyond comprehension. He said one thing that nearly drove him over the edge was the camp guards would take the prisoners out and mercilessly drive them to dig a trench. They would scream at them and beat them relentlessly and kick them to get them to work faster. The next day they would march them out to the same site and once again scream at them and beat them as they forced them to fill those same trenches. It was the meaninglessness of the work that made it so horrifying. But if people like Monod are right, then our whole lives and everything in them is nothing more than digging and filling in trenches. It was unbearable for Frankl, and it will be the same for us.

If you leave God out you are going to end up in the wrong place. Once when we were on vacation with our kids before they got married we decided to take a hike. The hike we planned to take was about 2 miles and only moderately difficult at most. But it had some points of interests we wanted to see. So we started off on the trail. It wasn’t long before the trail started going up a hill that was rather steep. We figured given the description we had read we would get over the hill fairly quickly. But it kept and was getting way more than moderately hard. We just kept going, but after a while we realized the trail just didn’t look like what we had read. After some discussion we decided something was wrong. We turned around and headed back down. We eventually discovered we were on the wrong trail. The trail we had started on was described as a very difficult 11 mile trek. We just wanted to go on a nice, easy, interesting walk, but we got on the wrong trail. If you start on the wrong trail you will end up on the wrong trail. If you want to master life it starts with God. If you don’t start there you will never get to your destination.

Because our society doesn't start with God we end up with a culture that has no sense of right or wrong, no real morality. We hear people say the important thing to do is the next right thing. But there is no right thing! There is no real purpose in life so people make great crusades out of the environment and eating healthy, which boils down to just trying to make sure our pointless, empty existence continues in its emptiness.

Noted astronomer, Allen Sandage early on was an atheist. But he said, "It was my science that drove me to the conclusion that the world is much more complicated than can be explained by science. We can't understand the universe in any clear way without the supernatural." Gerhard von Rad said, "one becomes competent and expert...in life...only if one begins from knowledge about God.

Laurie and I used to like to do jigsaw puzzles in the winter. When we had 1500 pieces to fit together there were 2 important things we needed to succeed. First, we had to have a starting point, then we needed to know what picture we were making. So we would find the four pieces that form the corners and then all the rest with straight edges. When you have put them together it forms a frame that enables you to start putting the puzzle together. Then it was important to have the picture on the box the puzzle came in. It shows you what the puzzle is supposed to look like. Without that it is nearly impossible to put the puzzle together. Life is a puzzle with many pieces for all of us. It is the knowledge of God that forms the frame and gives you the picture of what it is supposed to look like. Without him, you inevitably will be lost.

## MASTERING LIFE REQUIRES FEARING GOD

Not only does this verse tell us wisdom starts with God, it also tells us it begins with relating to God in a particular way. It says we must fear God. Wait, I thought God loves us and forgives us. Now you're telling me that we're supposed to be afraid of him and that this is crucial for being able to master life?

Early on in our ministry there was man who was extremely knowledgeable of the Bible and who was a much respected founding member of our church plant. But he only lasted in our church a couple of years, 3 at the most. He left because according to him I didn't preach enough about judgment. He wanted me to tell people they needed to fear the judgment of God. He pointed out how often the Bible talks about fearing God and this was what that means. Be afraid, be very afraid, because you are a sinner in the hands of an angry God who will pour out his

wrathful judgment on sinners. I began to discover that though he seemed at first to be a wonderful man, underneath he was filled with anger that would boil out at seemingly unwarranted occasions. His anger had done great damage to his own family. Oddly, his anger was mostly at his father, who was an unbending religious tyrant who, at least in his mind, served an angry, judgmental God. There was a sense of fear of the Lord in that family, but it most definitely did not lead to mastering life.

Isaiah 8:13. It says, “The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy. He is the one you are to fear. He is the one you are to dread.” Dread is a pretty strong word. When I was 16 years old I got a speeding ticket. It wasn’t that I was a wild teenager recklessly driving insane speeds. I was on a street where the speed limit changed and I didn’t notice it so I was going 48 in a 35 mile per hour zone. I dreaded telling my parents about it. I got through that, but there was more. For some reason instead of just paying for my ticket the powers that be mandated that I needed to meet with a judge. Man, I dreaded that meeting. I would have given anything to be pretty much anywhere else than in that meeting. It turned out to actually be no big deal, but the dread was powerful. Is that what God is telling us. We should dread him so we would rather be anywhere other than in his presence?

It would be easy to think that. When Daniel was confronted with a vision of the Lord in Daniel 10 he fainted because he was so scared. When Isaiah had his vision of the holy God on his throne he said, “Woe is me. I am a man of unclean lips.” So maybe God wants us to cower before him. Hebrews 10:31 says, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” That certainly sounds like this is someone you really would like to avoid at all cost. It is dreadful to fall into his hands.

However, when we consider what Isaiah said next we see that maybe this isn’t quite right. In the NIV translation Isaiah 8:14 says, “He will be a holy place; for both Israel and Judah he will be a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare.” That sounds like more of the same. He’s holy, so much so that he causes people to stumble and be caught in a trap. All pretty scary and negative. Unfortunately I don’t think that’s a good translation at all. But the New American Standard translation is closer to the original Hebrew. It has the first line as “He will be a sanctuary.” A sanctuary isn’t something you cower from in fear. It is something you run toward.



Many years ago when my brother was on the staff of a ministry to college students at the University of Washington he invited me to come speak at a retreat they had for the students in their ministry. It was held at a lodge on Mt. Baker, which is northeast of Seattle in the Cascades, in the winter. It was a true snow retreat because the place was blanketed in snow more than 6 feet deep. We went out in that snow and did some inner tubing. I know some of you love that kind of stuff. But my problem with it is that it was ridiculously cold, at least by my standards. And no matter how thoroughly and carefully bundled up you are, snow insidiously finds a way to get inside your clothes and boots. So there you are out in the cold with snow and wet creeping past your defenses. It gets miserable. But there was that lodge. That heated lodge. You could go inside, take off those wet clothes, dry off, dress in warm dry clothes, sit by a roaring fire and drink hot chocolate. It was a sanctuary from the cold. I did not dread it. It was something I looked forward to and was happy to run to. That is what a sanctuary is always like. If God is a sanctuary he is not something to run from and cower before.

In 1 John 4:18 the apostle wrote, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment." God's perfect love drives out fear in the sense of being terrified that God might harm or reject us. We need not fear like that. It is also important to remember what Jesus said is the most important commandment. What is it? To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength. You don't love with all your heart something that you dread and cower before in fear that it is going to vent anger on you and destroy you. Why then does God say we should fear and dread him? In what way should we fear him, and how is that the beginning of wisdom?

I think most Christians have, at some point, had a wish that they could have some sort of personal encounter with God that would kind of confirm our faith in him. I think we often think we wish God would do that so that we could have a more heartfelt reverence for God. Typically we kind of wish God would reveal himself, maybe in a vision the way he did with some of the prophets.

When I was preparing for this sermon one day I thought about that. I thought about what it would be like if God actually revealed himself to me in some way. I didn't have such a vision, but I kind of got a sense of what it might be like if I did. I realized it would be shattering. In one instant, in the blaze of the holiness of God, the truth about me would be revealed. It would be revealed how shallow I really am and how much pretense there is in my faith. I would see all of the ugliness that exists inside me. I would see how far I am from what God wants for me to be, from

what I should be. There is a reason when Isaiah, one of the greatest prophets who has ever lived, was shown a glimpse of God in his glory and holiness, his response was “woe is me.” I suspect that’s actually a sanitized version of what he really said. But the gist of it was, “Oh, no, I am so screwed.” To see God as he really is would instantly take away all the pretend religion and it would be scary.

But here’s the key question: is God a threat to us? We fear whatever we think might threaten us. So do we fear God because he is so ominous and dangerous to our existence? The answer is, on our own, absolutely yes, but in Christ, absolutely not. It sounds like it is at times. Hebrews 10:31 says, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Hebrews 12:29 says, “our God is a consuming fire.” So that all sounds super threatening and ominous. But that same writer said in Hebrews 10:19 that we have confidence to enter into the Holy Place, meaning right into the very presence of God, by the blood of Jesus Christ. Then in verse 22 he said, “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and the full assurance that faith brings.”

On my own merit God is a huge threat to me. But I don’t come to him on my merit, I come to him in Christ, on the merit of his Son, and that means being in God’s presence would not shatter me. It means that he would never condemn me and that nothing can stop him from loving me. Nothing can ever keep me from being safe in his presence.

Dr. John Yates II, the rector of Falls Church Anglican in Virginia, tells of the headmaster of his school when he was young. His name was Mr. Duncan. He stood 6 feet, 6 inches tall, and he was powerfully built with broad shoulders. He was a stern, erect man who always stood tall and had a big, deep commanding voice. Yates said to this day he has never met anyone as awe inspiring as Mr. Duncan. He was intimidating, so much so that Yates says a few years ago out of the blue Mr. Duncan called him. He didn’t realize it but his kids told him after the call ended, that when he realized who he was talking to he stood bolt upright off the sofa he had been sitting on and kept calling him, “Sir.” Yates says despite how commanding he was, Mr. Duncan had never spoken to him harshly. He was always kind towards him, and he had always taken a deep, almost fatherly interest in him when he was a poor teenaged boy. The result was that more than anything else, Yates wanted to please him. He wanted to live up to Mr. Duncan’s expectations and make him proud of him. He wanted to be what Mr. Duncan saw in him and he

feared letting him down. And that's a good picture of what it means for us to fear the Lord.

Fearing the Lord has two aspects to it:

***An attitude of loving awe and reverence***

Acts 9:31 says the church in Judea was "living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit." God was real to them, and they lived in awe of him.

Toby and Anna recently went on a tour of Israel because Anna is the marketing director for a company that runs those tours. Obviously she needed to experience what her company does. There was one moment in their tour that no tour operator created. They were in the Muslim part of Jerusalem. They visited an ancient Catholic church there called the church of St. Anne. This old church had magnificent, high vaulted ceilings. It wasn't the church that made the impact on them, it was what happened while they were there. As they were admiring the building a large group of tourists who were followers of Jesus from Brazil came in. After some time these Brazilian Christians began spontaneously singing. The acoustics in the building were tremendous so the voices soared and filled the building. They sang the song *Holy Spirit*, by the Torwalts. "Holy Spirit you are welcome here, come flood this place and fill the atmosphere. Your glory, God, is what our hearts long for, to be overcome by your presence, Lord." Only they were singing it in Portuguese, their native language. But soon other tourists began joining. Italians singing in their language, Americans singing in English, Arabs sang in Arabic, people from many parts of the globe, all singing that song together, but each in their own tongue. They were in a Catholic church, in the Muslim part of a Jewish nation, people from all over the world singing in different languages the same message to the Lord Jesus Christ. Toby and Anna said it was literally awesome, because it left them totally in awe. It was a spine tingling moment when the presence of God was palpable, powerful almost to overwhelming. They sensed God was there, present, real and awesome.

To fear God is to live knowing that he is real, he is holy, he is awesome beyond our ability to express. It is to know how majestic he is, but to be humbled and astounded by the vastness, the incomprehensibility of his love and mercy, his grace given to us. It is to have our hearts bursting with love and reverence for him every day of our lives.

***A desire and commitment to please God in every way possible***

But it is also to have the kind of attitude Pastor Yates had for Mr. Duncan. It is to passionately desire to please him, to be what he sees in us, to never disappoint him. It is to say that his will for us is what we want most in life.

Deuteronomy 10:12 says, “And now Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

It is absurd to claim to fear God, but then have no interest in doing what he commands. That would be taking him lightly. Recently when we were taking care of Ella and Cara one day we walked down the street to one of our neighbors house where quite a few kids and a couple of moms had congregated at the end of the day. Ella loves to play with the kids, so we hung out there for some time. Among the kids were two boys that are about 9 and 7 who take piano lessons from Laurie. We know these boys. They are great kids. They were shooting some basketballs so I joined them for a few minutes. They know me basically as an old guy who is a pastor. They don't see anything else. They always treat me with respect, but I don't register much on their radar. At one point one of them asked me if I had ever played sports when I was younger. He has never seen me do anything athletically oriented so I think he kind of figured all I ever do and have ever done is religious sort of stuff. I told him I loved sports and had played quite a bit. Then he asked me what kind of sports I had played and how much. I said I played baseball, football, hockey, tennis, even basketball to some extent but my primary sport was baseball and that I had played in high school and even a couple of years in college. It took him by surprise. The classic jaw drop was a dead giveaway. He clearly did not expect that. Right after that I hit about 4 very long range shots, easily 3 pointers, in a row, and he said, “How do you shoot like that?” I went from being just an old guy who probably can't chew gum and walk at the same time to someone who might actually know something about sports and who maybe he should listen to. In a sense, he went from regarding me very lightly to suddenly have some respect, some fear if you will, with the result that he should maybe pay attention to what I said. When we have fear of the Lord we will pay attention to what he says and see it is important in our lives.

If we fear the Lord in that way, inevitably we are going to master life, for we will have true wisdom, God's wisdom in everything we do. We will live according to the instructions of the Author of Life who wants us to experience life in its fullest and best.

