

STUDY 3

‘Know Thyself’

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The title of this study comes from the wisdom of ancient Greece:

The ancient Greek aphorism ‘Know thyself’ (Greek: γνῶθι σεαυτόν or *gnothi seauton*, or *σαντόν with the ε contracted*) was inscribed in the pronaos (forecourt) of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi—according to the Greek periegetic (travelogue) writer Pausanias (10.24.1).

... The saying ‘Know thyself’ may refer by extension to the ideal of understanding human behavior, morals, and thought, because ultimately to understand oneself is to understand other humans as well. However, the ancient Greek philosophers thought that no man can ever comprehend the human spirit and thought thoroughly, so it would have been almost inconceivable to know oneself fully. Therefore, the saying may refer to a less ambitious ideal, such as knowing one’s own habits, morals, temperament, ability to control anger, and other aspects of human behavior that we struggle with on a daily basis.¹

With this went another inscription: ‘Nothing in excess’, implying that by self-knowledge and self-control one could live a moderately good life. Some would uphold those ideals today. Some would use the phrase to unearth hidden powers within oneself that would set one apart from others.²

None of this is quite what we seek to do in this study. We do seek to know who we are as human beings, so we can be what we are meant to be, and help others to be the same. Like the ancient Greek philosophers, along with the preacher in the biblical book Ecclesiastes, we find we cannot plumb the mystery of ourselves and of humanity simply by trying to seek it out. We look to the revelation of God in the Scriptures, and to the Spirit of God that is given to us in Christ.

HUMAN LIMITATION, AND HUMAN FOOLISHNESS

In seeking to know who we are as human beings, we find ourselves in the position of Agur son of Jakeh, in words addressed mysteriously ‘to Ithiel and Ucal’ (Prov. 30:1, RSV)—whoever they may be. It is admitted that, ‘The Hebrew of this verse is obscure’, and the *New Revised Standard Version* attempts an interpretation that indicates that in seeking this out we become ‘weary’ or ‘spent’—at the end of our resources:

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Know_thyself>, accessed 5th June 2008.

² The inscription was used with these overtones in the ‘Matrix’ series of movies.

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The words of Agur son of Jakeh. An oracle.

Thus says the man: I am weary, O God,
I am weary, O God. How can I prevail?
Surely I am too stupid to be human;
I do not have human understanding (Prov. 30:1–2).

There are two aspects to this inability to know ourselves by trying to find out: our limitation as human creatures, and our stupidity as sinners. We do well to recognise our legitimate limitation as human creatures. There are some things it is not needful for us to know, such as what we would need to know to run the universe if we were God. ‘The secret things belong to the LORD our God’ (Deut. 29:29). It could be these were the things we were seeking to know when, in order to be as God (see Gen. 3:5), we took the fruit of the tree that gives ‘knowledge of what is good and what is bad’ or ‘knowledge of everything’ (Gen. 2:17, GNB, with footnote). This is when human beings ‘became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools’ (Rom. 1:21–22). Thus we find ourselves in the fog of stupidity that Agur son of Jakeh complains of, in which we do not know even what a human being is meant to know. When God says through Isaiah, ‘my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways’ and says that His ways and thoughts are so much higher than ours, He is not speaking of our proper human limitations. He is contrasting His ways and thoughts with the way of the wicked and the thoughts of the unrighteous (see Isa. 55:7–9). In this debauched condition, what can we know of ourselves, or of wisdom?

Deuteronomy 29:29 goes on to say: ‘but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to observe all the words of this law’—God shows us all we need to know to do what we need to do as human beings. So Isaiah 55 holds out hope:

Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (Isa. 55:6–7).

Agur son of Jakeh knows that if we are going to find out anything of truth and value it will need to come from outside ourselves, and possibly gives a hint of how this might happen:

I have not learned wisdom,
nor have I knowledge of the holy ones [or *Holy One*].
Who has ascended to heaven and come down?
Who has gathered the wind in the hollow of the hand?
Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is the person’s name?
And what is the name of the person’s child?
Surely you know! (Prov. 30:3–4).

If we are to know wisdom concerning ourselves or anything else, it will need to come from the one who created and orders all things; possibly through one closely related

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with the Creator, who has come down from heaven. Agur son of Jakeh has confidence in the veracity and completeness of the word that comes from this One:

Every word of God proves true;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
Do not add to his words, or else he will rebuke you,
and you will be found a liar (Prov. 30:5–6).

With this others concur:

LORD, I know that people’s lives are not their own;
it is not for them to direct their steps (Jer. 10:23, TNIV).

For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding (Prov. 2:6).

This wisdom and understanding is not morally inert or neutral, but has to do with ‘righteousness and justice and equity, every good path’ (Prov. 2:9). It is by this wisdom that the Lord has made, founded and established all things (see Ps. 104:24; Prov. 3:19).

Can we, back through the fog of our sinfulness, and limited as we are, gain some sense of who we are, and what we knew of wisdom, when we were created?

DELIGHTING IN THE HUMAN RACE

When we look to the word of God concerning our creation, we find that God in His wisdom found us anything but stupid:

When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race (Prov. 8:27–31).

God’s delight in His own wisdom is matched by His delight in us His own creatures. Why should this not be so regarding His ‘son’ Adam (see Luke 3:38), whom God by His wisdom made in His image, according to His likeness (see Gen. 1:26; compare 5:1–3)? No less is the Father delighted when the true human being, the second Adam (see Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:45–49), appears on earth:

This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased (Matt. 3:17, RSV).

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This is the intended, and ultimate, condition of human beings as created by God, with a ‘righteousness and justice and equity, every good path’ (Prov. 2:9) matching and fitting with God’s own.

We can gain a good sense of who we are as created, and our relationship with the wisdom of God, from Psalm 19. After setting out how the created order rejoices to bear witness to the glory of its Creator, the psalm then addresses the human scene:

The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward (Ps. 19:7–11).

While this is clearly a poetic discourse on the law of God, we do well to note what it tells us of ourselves as human beings in relationship with God and His wisdom. We are those whose souls are revived by the perfect law of the Lord, and whose simplicity is made wise by the Lord’s decrees. Our hearts rejoice in the right precepts of God, and our eyes are enlightened by His clear commandments. We live forever with a fear of the Lord that is utterly pure (to this we shall return: see below). We are those who desire the true and righteous ordinances of God more than the finest gold, and we find them sweeter to us than honey from the honeycomb. We are glad to heed their warning against evil (compare Gen. 2:16–17), and our great reward is in keeping them.

The psalm goes on to display our awareness that we have not lived in a manner consistent with this way we are made, but hope is held out that we can be this way, through the redemption that God brings:

But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer (Ps. 19:12–14).

Even as we sense our failure to be what we have been made to be, do not our hearts resonate with and long to be that way, especially once we know that we can be

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cleared from all fault, rescued from the dominion of insolence, and brought to blameless innocence that is acceptable to God, through His utterly dependable action as our Redeemer?

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

At the centre of such glorious human condition is this:

... the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever (Ps. 19:9).

We know that ‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom’ (Ps. 111:10). This ‘fear’ of the Lord, which delights God, is in marked contrast with ‘any who are wise in their own conceit’, whom God does not regard favourably (Job 37:24). The preacher in Ecclesiastes sums up the whole of what it means to be a human being in these words:

Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone [literally: the whole of man, or the whole of being human] (Eccl. 12:13).

It is the observing of the commandments of God that will mark out the nation of Israel among the other peoples as ‘a wise and discerning people’ (Deut. 4:6).

The fear of God has to do, first of all, with a healthy and wholesome regard for moral consequences—as the preacher goes on to say:

For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil (Eccl. 12:14).

Indeed, one who loves the law of God is able to say:

My flesh trembles for fear of you,
and I am afraid of your judgments (Ps. 119:120).³

The preacher has already spelled out some of these consequences:

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God (Eccl. 2:24–26).

With this goes a fully contented acceptance that we are creatures of God, and not gods ourselves:

I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures

³ These very judgements are designated as life-giving elsewhere in the psalm: see verses 149 and 156.

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forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him (Eccl. 3:10–14).

It is the loss or absence of this fear of God that gives rise to moral anarchy. What reason did Abraham give for deceiving the kingdom of Abimelech of Gerar that his wife Sarah was his sister?

I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife (Gen. 20:11).

On this occasion Abraham was mistaken, for the pagan Abimelech did indeed fear God, and was anxious to be in the right before Him.

IN THE BEGINNING

Was there a place for this fear of God in the garden, when human beings were in their original condition? Indeed there was, for in that place there were commandments of God, with a consequence attached if they were broken:

The LORD God commanded . . . ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die’ (Gen. 2:16–17).

It was the woman and man’s acceptance of the serpent’s lying disregard for the consequence—‘You will not die’ (Gen. 3:4)—that led them into sin. Even though they came to believe that this action ‘was to be desired to make one wise’ (Gen. 3:6), the true wisdom, in that situation as in every other, was to fear God and keep His commandments.

The commands regarding the trees in the garden were not the only commandments given to the man and the woman. The basic creational mandate was given with God’s blessing to enable them to fulfil it:

God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ (Gen. 1:28).

Given that this meant they, made in the image of God, were to fill the earth with this relationship and blessing of God, there was enough here to keep the man and woman fully occupied until ‘all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD’ (Num. 14:21).

The abandonment of true wisdom meant the usurping of that purpose of God by substitute ends and means. ‘God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes’ (Eccl. 7:29). The sorry course of this usurpation is traced in Romans 1:18–32. If this traces the reversal of the original true wisdom, and the descent into the darkness of senseless futility, impurity, perversity, and all kinds of wickedness, then we may be able to sense something of our original condition in its opposite, which could be delineated as follows:

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Human beings are in the favour of God, in godliness and righteousness, living in the truth. We know what can be known about God, because God has shown it to us. God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, are understood and seen by us through the things that He has made. We know God, honour Him as God, and give thanks to Him, and so are wise. We have the glory of the immortal God. The desires of our hearts are pure, and our bodies are noble and upright, as we worship and serve the Creator, who is blessed forever! A woman and a man have natural intercourse with each other [as one flesh, they are naked and not ashamed!], and receive in their persons the benefits of their faithfulness. We acknowledge God, our minds are exalted, and we do what ought to be done. We are filled with every kind of righteousness, goodness, generosity, and kindness. Full of appreciation for each other, full of love, compatibility, truthfulness, helpfulness, we speak well of each other, and build one another up. We love God, we speak kindly, we are humble, and make much of each other. We find new ways of doing good. We obey our parents. We are sensible, faithful, sensitive, and merciful. We know God’s decree that those who are not this way deserve to die, and we warmly encourage one another in the practice of these things.

That we should, by our own decision, abandon such a state, is a desperately wicked and inexplicable act.

IN THE END

Inherent in the creational mandate or vocation (Gen. 1:28; compare Num. 14:21; 2 Pet. 3:13), in the sanctifying of the sabbath (Gen. 2:3; compare Heb. 4:9–11), and in the gift of marriage (Gen. 2:24; compare Eph. 5:32; Rev. 21:2), is the promise of new heavens and a new earth where righteousness dwells, a fulfilled rest from labours, and a holy city or family of people who are one with God.⁴ These elements would have been known by us proleptically, by anticipation, in the original creation, and are no doubt built in to the fabric of our being as that for which we have been created. Together these make up ‘the hope of eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before the ages began’ (Titus 1:2).

These things, with the Father, ‘the only wise God’ (Rom. 16:27) who purposed them, were present from the beginning, and so were a prominent part of the reality that we were in then. The New Testament speaks of these things as fulfilled in Christ: he is the one in whom all things will be united (Eph. 1:10), the one in whom our true rest is found (Matt. 11:28–30), the bridegroom of the bride (Rev. 19:5–16). He too was present, with these capacities, in the beginning—‘all things have been created through him and for him’ (Col. 1:16)—and no doubt his mark is on all that is made, particularly on human beings who are destined to be conformed to his image (see Rom. 8:29). No less was the Holy Spirit present in the beginning (see Gen. 1:2; Job 33:4; 32:8), as the one through whom is revealed ‘God’s wisdom, secret and hidden,

⁴ These three elements are nominated in Geoffrey Bingham, *Love’s Most Glorious Covenant*, Redeemer Baptist Press, Castle Hill, 1997, pp. 40–66.

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which God decreed before the ages for our glory . . . what God has prepared for those who love him’ (1 Cor. 2:7, 9, 10). Jesus spoke of the Father when he looked to a time when ‘they shall all be taught by God’ (John 6:45; quoting Isa. 54:13; compare Jer. 31:34). Jesus, ‘in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Col. 2:3), spoke of himself as our ‘one instructor’ (Matt. 23:10). Jesus also said that the Holy Spirit ‘will teach you everything . . . and he will declare to you the things that are to come’ (John 14:26; 16:13).⁵ If all of this was present in the beginning and teaching us in all wisdom the things that God had purposed from before the foundation of the world, what wisdom and joyous anticipation was ours! As Geoffrey Bingham has said:

Godly wisdom relates to all that God is, all that He does, especially in creating the world, and all that He has planned for that creation such as upholding and ruling it, and finally bringing it to a state of regeneration and perfection, whilst at the same time regenerating His people. We will see that not only does wisdom have to do with God creating this world, and with upholding and ruling it, but that wisdom is always ‘forward-looking’, that is, it has a goal of its own as designed by God and we do not understand wisdom until we see what creation, redemption and glorification are all about. He—or she—who has this wider vision knows the glory of wisdom.⁶

OUR REDEEMER FROM OF OLD

As we lament the loss of this primal purity, we need to know that present there also was the means of our salvation. The One whom we then knew as our Father (as in Gen. 5:1–3; Luke 3:38), is also ‘our Redeemer from of old’ (Isa. 63:16). The Son, through whom all things were made, was also ‘destined before the foundation of the world’ as ‘a lamb without defect or blemish’ whose blood would be shed (1 Pet. 1:20, 19); and we who are being saved had our names ‘written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered’ (Rev. 13:8). As our ‘wisdom from God’ he is also our ‘righteousness and sanctification and redemption’ (1 Cor. 1:30). The Spirit of God, who has made us and has given us life and understanding (as in Job 33:4; 32:8), is also the one who will breathe the creation newly into life after we have died under God’s judgement (see Ps. 104:29–32). This grace that ‘has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel’ is the grace that ‘was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began’ (2 Tim. 1:10, 9).

This gospel acts on us to restore us to a true and wholesome fear of God:

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered (Ps. 130:3–4).

⁵ An explication of the Father, the Son and the Spirit as teachers is found in Geoffrey Bingham, *True God or New Guru?* NCPI, Blackwood, 1979, pp. 10–24.

⁶ Geoffrey Bingham, *The Only Wise God*, unpublished manuscript, n.d., ch. 2, p. 9.

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Assured from the beginning was the way we could return to what we knew of the wisdom of God, and now even more so, to the age to come:

Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people. He said in a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water’ (Rev. 14:6–7).