

Thinking About God

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Date: 11 October 2026

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[0:00] Well, I'd like us this morning to turn back to Proverbs chapter 1. We're going to focus! especially on the words of verse 7, which say, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

Fools despise wisdom and instruction. Last week and this week, we're doing a little three-part, well, it's kind of turned into a three-and-a-half-part series called Knowing, Speaking, and Thinking About God.

And in many ways, these are straightforward things that we want to be doing all the time. We want to know more about God, we want to speak together about God, and we want to be thinking about God in our lives. They're very straightforward and simple things.

But, as we saw a bit last week, and as I hope we'll see again today, actually, under all these categories, there's a profound level of truth and some wonderfully rich theology for us to think about.

Last Sunday morning, we looked at knowing about God, and we were looking at the distinction between God's perfect knowledge of Himself and the fact that our knowledge of Him is imperfect and derived from that, but still true.

[1:16] And theologians have drawn this distinction between the archetypal knowledge of God and the ectipal knowledge of God. Now, these are fancy words that we don't tend to use very often in day-to-day life, but they're a helpful distinction.

The words don't matter so much, it's the distinction that's important. The fact that God's knowledge of Himself is perfect and complete, and true, He knows everything about Himself and everything about everything else.

Our knowledge is limited, and it's imperfect, and we're never going to have knowledge that's at the same level as God's.

Within these distinctions, we drew another sub-distinction between surface knowledge, deeper knowledge, and exhaustive knowledge. And so, surface knowledge is knowledge that everybody has. God's common grace means that everybody, no matter what our circumstances, we can learn and know things, and we can learn and know truths about God.

The world around us teaches us about that, especially even as we look around us, we see the heavens and the earth declaring the glory of God. As believers, we can have a deeper level of knowledge, because we can see that we can learn lots about the universe, but what we learn from Scripture is actually telling us that behind that universe, and woven through the whole of that universe, is the handiwork of God.

[2:33] So, our faith in Jesus leads us to a deeper level of knowledge. But never to an exhaustive level of knowledge, because only God has that. Now, the reason why all of this is important to recognize is because it's reminding us that in our theology, we have to embrace mystery.

And this is something, sometimes something that we can struggle with, where there's always things where, like, I don't know how that works, I don't know why that's happening. And sometimes we want everything to be explained to us.

The Bible never does that. It doesn't explain everything to us. And it's only when you see this distinction between the archetypal knowledge of God and the archetypal knowledge of people, you realize, actually, that makes perfect sense.

Because our knowledge is only ever limited, and it's never going to be perfect. And we're never actually going to be able to grasp the fullness of God's glory, His majesty, and of how everything works.

So, this is where it's a kind of crucial turning point here, because some people don't like mystery. But we have to actually remember that theology without mystery doesn't make sense.

[3:45] Theology without mystery doesn't actually make sense. Because if you have a God that you can understand every single detail of, then you've just made your God far smaller than He actually is.

So, knowing about God, a fascinating area for us to think about. One thing we highlighted under this heading that's crucial to remember is that there are lots of mysteries about God that can never be fully explained.

But there's one thing that's not a mystery. There's one thing that's been revealed with crystal clarity, and that is how we are saved.

The gospel comes to us with a clear and simple message. Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved. There is no mystery about the question, what must I do to be saved?

So, that's what we saw when we thought about knowing about God. Last Sunday evening, we looked at speaking about God. And again, this is more complicated than we maybe realize, because that distinction between God as the one who is altogether above us, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, means that if we are speaking about God, we're actually taking ourselves to the very limits of what our language can actually express.

[5:01] And so, when we use language to describe God, that's actually a very difficult thing to do. Because if we say that Solomon is wise, then we're like, well, we can understand what that means.

Solomon, he was a person in the Bible. He was wise. When we say that he's wise, we know what that means. When we say God is wise, it's at a totally different level. And so, wisdom for God is bigger and deeper and way more profound than our words can express.

And we highlighted last week that this means that when we talk about God, we are using what we call analogical language. So, when we say that God is wise, or that God is good, or that God is powerful, we know something of what that means, because we know what it means to be good, and to be wise, and to be powerful.

But at the same time, we are recognizing that actually, with God, all of these things are at another level altogether. And that's important, because what it means is that when you say that God is powerful, or that God is good, or that God is wise, and most of all, when we say that God is loving, it means that, yes, we know something of what it means for God to be loving, but the truth is, God's love is actually unspeakable.

It's actually beyond what our language can express. And so, speaking about God, you realize, wow, the glory and majesty of God is, it's beyond what I can actually express with my words.

[6:46] Today, we're going to be thinking, we're going to be bringing our series to a conclusion by looking at the third part, thinking about God. And again, at one level, this is straightforward, and it's something that I hope we're doing all the time.

We want God to be in our thoughts every day. One of the things that frustrates me most is that I feel like I forget about God far too often. Very often in the morning, I will start work, and I will pray, and I'll think, I want to be thinking about God all day, I want to be praying regularly, and then you just crack on with another day, and before you know it, the whole day's gone by, and God's hardly been in my thoughts.

That's something that I find frustrating. I'm sure many of you feel the same, because we want to be thinking about God. We want to be meditating about God, not in a weird mystical way, but just in the sense of God being on our minds.

And that's something that we want to be through when we come to church, and when we read our Bibles day to day, personally. We don't just want to kind of get it done, and then blast on with the next thing. Instead, we want what we hear at church, what we read in the Bible, to stay on our minds, to be thinking about it.

So we want to be thinking about God every day, as much as we can. But in our sermon today, I want us just to dig a little bit deeper into this whole idea about our thoughts of God.

[8:00] And as we do that, we're going to look at the words of Proverbs 1, 7. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, fools despise wisdom and understanding. And the key word I want us to think about is the word beginning.

Because that's getting us to think about a starting point. It's getting us to think about a source. It's getting us to think about where our thoughts actually find their starting place.

And theologians will often describe that in terms of first principles. So when we think about God, the question we want to ask is, what are our first principles?

What are the kind of key categories that we are holding? And the big thing I want us to see today is that wherever our first principles land, it's going to have a huge impact on where our thoughts of God will end up.

And to help us to see this, I am going to inflict a whole ton of rather terrible looking diagrams on you. So this is a picture of a mountain.

[9:14] And we're going to use this as our kind of guide today. That's a mountain. We're going to use the image of a mountain and a river and a loch.

Now, as you all know, mountains, they're all around us. Rain falls on mountains. That water runs down rivers. It eventually ends up in lochs. It eventually ends up in the sea.

You learn all about that in primary school. The big thing I want us to see is that if you land on one side of that mountain, you're going to end up in the loch over there.

And if you land on that side of the mountain, you're going to end up in the loch over there. So the side of the mountain that you land on has a massive impact on your destination.

So for example, Mont Blanc is on the border between France and Italy. If a raindrop lands on the France side, it's going to flow down into France. If a raindrop lands on the Italy side, then it's going to flow down into Italy.

[10:15] So if you're on that side, that side depends on where you're going to end up. Same with Mount Everest. It's on the border of Nepal and Tibet. Land on one side, you end up in Nepal. Land on the other side, you end up in China.

In terms of our thinking about God, this is the key point. Where our first principles land is going to have a massive impact on where our thinking ends up.

But the big thing I want you to see is when you look at that diagram, it only takes one decision to end up on either side of that dotted line.

And that's what I'm wanting us to see. The lochs at the bottom are miles apart, whereas either side of the dotted line is one choice.

And that applies in lots of different ways. And so we're going to think about that together. It's all of its teaching us that we need to think very carefully about our first principles.

[11:22] In other words, when it comes to God, we need to think about how we think. And we're going to split our sermon in two today because I was never going to finish by 12.

Because I want to look at 10 examples. So we're going to do five this morning and we're going to do five tonight. And the ones we're going to do this morning are quite simple. And the five that we're going to do tonight are a little bit more complex, but I hope still helpful.

Our five this morning all arise from Proverbs 1, 7. And so let's just blast through these together. All of this is regarding our first principles.

So the first example is just thinking about the Lord that you see there in verse 7. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

And that's setting before us the distinction between whether we believe in the supernatural or whether we just believe in the natural world around us.

[12:22] So the fear of the Lord is getting us the question of our first principles, either naturalistic or supernatural. Now, what do I mean by that? Well, basically, a naturalistic worldview is where you say there's nothing supernatural.

All that there is is what we see in front of us. All that there is is the material world that's come from nothing and that's heading to nothing and there's nothing spiritual or supernatural beyond that.

Now, that's a first principle decision that someone has to make. Do I believe that supernatural is real or do I say no? It's only the natural material world that's real. That's a decision that you have to make.

If you fall on the naturalistic side, you are heading to the loch of atheism. That's obvious. It's the only loch on that side. That's the way you're going to go.

But if you're going to land on the supernatural side, well, there's tons of different religious lochs that you can end up in, but all of them are going to have some sense of belief that there is more to reality than just what we can see in front of us.

[13:26] And I saw this very perfectly when I was in school. I had a friend in school and often we would talk about what we believed and stuff like that. And at one point in the school, he decided, I'm going to be an atheist.

And so he just decided that I am stepping to that side of the line. I'm an atheist. And that meant that he was only going in one direction in terms of what he believed.

That first principle decision, naturalistic, supernatural, is going to have a massive effect on how you read the Bible. Because the people who are on the naturalistic side of the line, they're going to read a miracle in the Bible and they're going to say miracles don't happen.

They're going to read about the resurrection of Jesus and they say resurrections don't happen. And so it's going to shape the way you read the Bible. This is why it's a first principle. Whatever side of that line you land on is going to have a huge impact in terms of how you interpret the information that's given to you about God.

And all of it's connecting us back to some of the most crucial questions that we can ever ask. When you see those words, the Lord, in Proverbs 1-7 or in any other verse in the Bible, you've got to ask the question, is he real?

[14 : 39] And if he is real, what's he like? And why does it matter? The question, do you believe in God, is a first principle question.

And wherever you land on the side of that line, has got the potential to send you to conclusions that are miles apart. That takes us on to the next question.

Supposing you do believe in the supernatural, I'm sure everybody here does, supposing you do, it takes us to the next question, the question of whether you believe in ultimate truth or no ultimate truth.

And that's connecting us to this idea of knowledge, the whole idea, well, what is true knowledge?

And this first principle decision is whether or not you think that there is one ultimate and exclusive truth, or whether you think, no, there's no ultimate truth.

And to say that there's no ultimate truth, that's really the mindset of postmodernism, which has been hugely influential in our society over the past 80 to 100 years or so. And if you go on to that side of the line, if you go on to the no ultimate truth side of the line, you're going to end up in the locks of pluralism, where you're like, well, there's loads of different ways to God, or you're going to end up in skepticism, where you're like, well, there's nothing we can ever be sure of any sort of truth, or you end up in the lock of individualism, where it's like, well, my truth is for me.

[16 : 05] You can have your truth, and there isn't really any overarching truth. And so, you fall onto the no ultimate truth side of the line, that's the rivers you're going down, that's the locks that you're going to end up in.

If you go on the other side of the line, and say that there is such a thing as ultimate truth, then at the very least, it means that you believe that there's only one lock that's right.

That actually there is ultimate truth. And we need to find out what it is. And that raises the whole question of knowledge. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

In other words, what are the answers to life's biggest questions? Are there answers? And if there are, where do we find them? These are first principle questions that have a huge effect on our thinking.

And that question of finding answers answers takes us to our next first principle question, the question of no authority or authority. And this is applying in particular to how we read the Bible.

[17 : 11] It's speaking about the wisdom and instruction that God is revealing to us. And as we said before, your first principles are going to determine how you respond to reading the Bible.

And so if you land on the no authority side, where you're like, well, the Bible's just like any other book. You make that decision and you go on that side of the line, it's going to sweep you down a whole time. It's going to sweep you down into all sorts of different conclusions.

You might end up in the loch of skepticism where you're like, well, you know, don't really believe all that. I'm kind of skeptical about the Bible. It might leave you in the loch of curiosity where you're like, well, I quite like the Bible, quite curious about it, like to find it a bit more, but, you know, it's not really going to have a huge amount of influence on my life.

You might even land in the loch of respectful interest where you're like, well, I'm very respectful of the Bible and I want to make sure that, you know, I give it an appropriate place in my life.

And maybe even, and some people have even found themselves actually even in academic theological study where they're studying the Bible, but they're not actually attaching any authority to it.

[18 : 21] And so you go in the non-authority side of it, it can sweep you to lots of different conclusions. If you start on the authority side and say, the Bible has authority.

In it, God is speaking to us. In it, God is laying out commandments that we are to follow. And in it, God is telling us what He wants us to do.

If you go on that side, you end up in the loch of accountability where we realize we have got to listen to what God is saying.

And that's really everything that's been conveyed by that idea of wisdom and instruction. If God gives us instruction, it's not just so that it can be like, oh, well, thanks, I'll put that in my kind of catalog of good advice. If God gives us instruction, it's because He expects us to follow it.

And that extent of our accountability to God, that extent of our decision about whether the Bible has authority or not, that's going to massively influence how we think about God and how we respond to what He's saying to us.

[19:38] And that takes us to the fourth, first principle decision, the whole principle of whether we are sinful or whether we are actually just neutral and that actually we're fine.

And this is where, you know, the Proverbs 1 and the whole of Proverbs uses the language of fools and that's really expressing the fact that there are, from Proverbs' point of view, there's two categories of people.

There's the wise who are listening to God, following God and seeking to obey God. And there's the fools who are following a path that ignores God, that departs from Him, and that is following all the luring and the temptation of sin.

This first principle decision has shaped humanity's religious convictions for centuries. So on the one side, you've got the neutral side that's like, well, people are basically okay.

And you can, there's this long history. Way back in the early church, there was a huge thing called Pelagianism, which basically was a guy called Pelagius who argued that. He says, we're born neutral and we just need to make sure that our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds.

[20:48] And that's how it works. That's how you become a Christian. Today you see it in secular humanism where it's like, well, yeah, we're basically good and we just need to carry on being good. All sorts of different examples of the same thing.

And if you go onto the neutral side, that's where it's going to take you. But if you fall on the side, that first principle which recognizes that we're sinners, then that leads us to the loch where we realize we need to be saved.

It leads us to the loch of repentance. And this is a hard one for us to take because the language of fool can be quite offensive. The language of sin can be quite offensive.

But in terms of our thinking, it's forcing us to consider whether our own judgment is reliable, whether our reasoning is dependable, and whether in our decision-making we always get things right.

And one of the biggest first principle mistakes that we can ever make is to think that we don't make mistakes. And there are lots of people who think that. It's something that you see in society a lot just now.

[21:54] And so lots of people will say, you know, as a first principle you need to follow your heart, but is that heart trustworthy? As a first principle, lots of people say you need to be true to yourself, but is that truth, the right truth to be true to?

And that first principle question, the state of our own hearts, the reliability of our hearts, whether we're neutral or sinful, the side of that line that you land on is going to make a massive difference to the conclusions that you end up holding.

And then last of all, it kind of all gets summed up with what's really the main point of Proverbs 1-7, the whole question of whether we fear the Lord or not. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

That's not so much speaking to us about, you know, kind of sort of idea of terror or cowering. It's more whether your view of God is high and profound, that there's that reverent fear of God, or whether your view of God is kind of small and convenient.

So, on that side of the line, the fear of the Lord is saying, I can't mess about with God. And all of that ties back in with everything we've been saying about God being in a whole different category to us.

[23:10] Whereas, on this side of the line, do not fear God, you might like God, you might respect God, but you're thinking, but this can be on my terms. And so, on the do not fear side, you get swept down the rivers and the lochs, the rivers and the streams that will take you to the loch of nominal Christianity, where we might say, well, yeah, I am a believer and I like going to church and I respect the Bible, but I still want to live on my own terms.

Whereas, if we fall on the fear, fearing God side of that line, then we realize that whenever we approach God, we're standing on holy ground, we're unworthy, we don't deserve anything he gives us, and that will lead us into the loch of reverence, of worship, and of humility.

Now, there are many, many more pairs that I could put before you. All of these are just examples. The key thing I'm trying to get to emphasize in this is that your decision, your first principle decision, is one decision.

But it's going to have huge implications in terms of where your thinking ends up. The side of the mountain that you land on is going to determine the streams and the rivers that carry you and ultimately will lead you to the loch of your own conclusions.

And the danger is that, you know, we might make a small one-off decision with our first principles that feels like a small decision, but it can actually send you to a conclusion that's a long, long, long way from where you want to be.

[24 : 55] This is a different example and this is a sort of slightly different thing, but it illustrates the point that you could apply what I'm saying here to people who find themselves struggling with addiction.

Nobody stands at the top of the mountain and says, I want to be an addict. Nobody gets up in the morning and says, I want to be an addict. But they make the decision where they think, if I drink a bit more it's going to make me feel better.

And that first principle decision, that tiny decision, sweeps them down the mountain and they end up in the swamp of addiction. And so it's just that point, that the small decision, the tiny decision, has a massive impact.

And Proverbs captures that really well, verses 29 to 31. It speaks about those who hated knowledge, chose not to fear the Lord. They would have none of my counsel, they would despise my proof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and have the fill of their own devices.

They shall eat the fruit of their way. That's just another way of saying they'll end up in the loch on the side of the mountain that they've chosen. What they've decided has huge consequences.

[26 : 08] And so the key question is this, as you think about God, do you ever think about your first principles? And do you ever think about the fact that wherever you land with those first principles is going to sweep you down a stream and leave you swimming in your conclusions?

And the scary thing is that if we don't think about our first principles ourselves, it means that somebody else has thought about them for us. And some people jump into all sorts of conclusions about life and about faith and about God and about time and eternity.

They've never thought about their own first principles, they're just going along with what other people have decided. That's why it's so important for us to think about our first principles, about life and about truth and about God.

We need to think about how we think. As we conclude, I want to say two more things. We're going to draw two more mountains to finish.

first of all, it's to say that all of this is reminding us that in our thinking about God, we can make an easy, catastrophic mistake. Easy, because it only takes one step to go to either side of that dotted line.

[27 : 21] Catastrophic, because the wrong first principle can take you miles away from the truth. Now, there's loads of ways in which that could apply. I want to just highlight one that I think that some people in here might be at risk of making.

Some people in here, I think, might be at risk of making the mistake of thinking that you're unsavable. It doesn't want to save you, or maybe that you get a chance once and it's gone, or that you don't know enough, or that, as we were saying in the children's talk, that you haven't got yourself into a place where you're ready to take that step to follow Jesus.

For whatever reason, there's a hundred reasons where we can put ourselves on that side of the line, and we can think that we're unsavable. And if you step onto that side of the line, you're going to get swept down into a loch where you feel hopeless, or where you maybe feel resigned to thinking, well, this is not going to happen for me, or where you feel numb, or maybe where you feel a sense of despair.

And it all comes from standing on the wrong side of the line. Because that first principle, thinking that you are unsavable, is never, ever true.

And Jesus has brought you here today to call you back from these lochs, to call you back from that slope that's the wrong side of the mountain. He wants to reset your first principles because you

absolutely can be saved, and He absolutely wants to save you, and He has absolutely brought you here today to tell you that.

[29:12] That all He's saying is, look, just trust me, follow me, I'll do the rest, I'll help you every step of the way. never, ever, ever, please, never, ever, ever put yourself on the unsavable side of that dotted line.

That's never where you are. Jesus wants you to know that He absolutely can and will save you if you trust in Him. And the reason why that's possible is because of everything that Jesus has done. And this takes us to Christ. this one applies to Christ. And the first principle question that He faces is, is He willing or unwilling to save you?

And that's a dotted line that's just one step either side. And what I want us to see and recognize is that if Jesus goes on the willing side of that line, that means that He has to go down the longest and darkest stream.

And He has to go further and further and further away from the glory of heaven and from the love of His Father. And He has to go deeper and deeper and deeper into the pain and the horror of the cross.

[30:46] And my diagram is letting me down because the the loch at the bottom of this mountain should be miles off the screen. Because the final destination of that pathway for Jesus if He's going to save us is the swamp of forsakenness on the cross and all the agony of death in our place.

that's where that path takes Jesus. And for the first principle question He says I'm willing.

And all of it was to save you and to save me. Amen. Let's pray. Amen. may may may! may may