

Wisdom, Knowledge and Understanding

Similarities and Differences

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I. Introduction

The Scriptures emphasize the importance of growing in knowledge (Pr 18:15), more particularly in the knowledge of God (2 Pet 3:18; Col 1:10; 3:10). This study will explore the Biblical concepts of wisdom, knowledge and understanding, so that believers will be able to distinguish between the wisdom of this world and the wisdom from above (James 3:13-18).

A. Definitions

1. Wisdom

a. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition

- 1) accumulated philosophic or scientific learning
- 2) ability to discern inner qualities and relationships
- 3) good sense
- 4) generally accepted belief
- 5) a wise attitude or course of action
- 6) the teachings of the ancient wise men

b. Tyndale Bible Dictionary

1) Divine Wisdom

Although the term "wisdom" is used primarily in the OT with reference to human beings, all wisdom is ultimately rooted and grounded in God. Wisdom forms a central part of the nature of God. In wisdom God created the universe and human beings. Thus wisdom, in its positive connotations, is something inherent in God, reflected in creation, and a part of the reason for human existence. Wisdom in creation is reflected in the form and order that emerged out of primeval chaos. The wisdom of God expressed in the creation of humanity means that human life may also be marked by form and order, and that meaning in life may be found in the created world, which contains marks of divine wisdom. The wisdom of God is creative, purposeful, and good; it is not merely the intellectual activity of God. Created by divine wisdom, human beings have within them the God-given capacity for wisdom. Thus, it is impossible to understand human wisdom without first grasping its necessary antecedent, divine wisdom.

2) Human Wisdom

The word “wisdom,” with reference to human beings, is used in a variety of different ways in the OT. The word is often used as virtually synonymous with the term “knowledge,” but in its general and secular uses it commonly indicates applied knowledge, skill, or even cunning. Wisdom could be defined as either “superior mental capacity” or “superior skill.” Thus, wisdom is used to describe both the cunning of King Solomon and the skill of the craftsman Bezalel. But it was also used to describe mental capacities and skills that had a moral component—the capacity to understand and to do good. Thus, when Moses delegated some of his authority to newly appointed judges, he chose men who were wise, understanding, and experienced. Such men were considered the wise men in ancient Israel. Human wisdom, in this special sense, was not merely a gift from God, inherent at birth; it had to be developed consciously during a life lived in relationship with God. Thus this positive and special kind of wisdom in human beings cannot be understood apart from God.

This Hebraic concept of wisdom is strikingly different from the Greek concept. The Ionian philosophers, with remarkable power, developed a system of thought that began without the assumption of the existence of deity. They attempted to develop wisdom through human reason alone. But Hebrew wisdom, though it sought to develop both the reason and the intellect as did the Greeks, could start only with God. The mind and its capacities were God-given; thus, however secular in appearance the wisdom of the Hebrews might seem, it had God as its starting point. The reverence of God—namely the acknowledgment that God existed, created, and was important in human life—lay behind all the developments of Hebrew wisdom.

Human wisdom, in the Hebrew conception, is thus a development of the mind, an expansion of knowledge, and an understanding of both the meaning of life and how that life must be lived. It is thoroughly intellectual but has a powerful moral result. Wisdom was sought not for its own sake but always for its application to the meaning of life, because life—like wisdom—was God’s gift.

2. Knowledge

a. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition

- 1) the fact or condition of knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association
- 2) acquaintance with or understanding of a science, art, or technique
- 3) the fact or condition of being aware of something
- 4) the range of one's information or understanding
- 5) the circumstance or condition of apprehending truth or fact through reasoning
- 6) the fact or condition of having information or of being learned
- 7) the sum of what is known : the body of truth, information, and principles acquired by mankind

b. Tyndale Bible Dictionary

1) O.T. View

The Hebrew view of man is one of differentiated totality—the heart, soul, and mind are so interrelated that they cannot be separated. “To know” thus involves the whole being and is not simply an action of the mind. The heart is sometimes identified as the organ of knowledge. The implication is that knowledge involves both will and emotions. The Jew's concept of knowledge is beautifully illustrated in Isaiah 1:3: “An ox knows its owner, And a donkey its master's manger, But Israel does not know, My people do not understand. (NASB). Israel's failure lay not in ritual behavior but in refusal to respond in loving obedience to the God who has chosen her. Only the fool refuses to respond to this revelation. Thus the person who does not respond in obedience obviously has an incomplete knowledge of the Lord. “To know God” involves relationship, fellowship, concern, and experience.

2) N.T. View

The NT continues this basic idea of knowledge and adds some variations of its own. In the Gospel of John the knowledge of God is mediated through Jesus as the Logos. Jesus has perfect knowledge of God's purpose and nature, and reveals it to his followers: “If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also;” (NASB). The identification of Jesus' own relationship with the Father as a model for the relationship of the disciples indicates that knowledge signifies a personal relationship that is intimate and mutual.

The definition of eternal life in John 17:3 adds further content to this concept: “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the

only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” (NASB)
This concept is vastly different from that of Hellenistic mysticism, in which contemplation and ecstasy are consummated in the gradual merging of the knower and God. In John, by contrast, the result of knowledge is having a personal relationship with God through his Son.

Paul also places the revelation of God in Christ as the source of knowledge. God has made known the “mystery of his will” to the one who is “in Christ.” The spiritual person is taught by the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:12–16) and responds to the truth as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. Again, there is emphasis on relationship and encounter as essential elements in the concept of knowledge.

Christian knowledge of God is not based simply on observation or speculation but is the result of experience in Christ. This knowledge is contrasted sharply with natural wisdom, which operates from an incorrect perspective. Paul is quick to point out that the mystery of God’s redemptive plan has been made known and there is now no room for ignorance. Knowledge, then, is the whole person standing in relationship with God through Christ.

3. Understanding

a. Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition

- 1) a mental grasp
- 2) the power of comprehending
- 3) the power to make experience intelligible by applying concepts and categories

B. Vocabulary

The terms wisdom, knowledge and understanding are used frequently in the Bible. The fallen world we live in ascribes its own definitions to these words, so it is important for every believer to fully grasp the meaning of each of these words as used in the Scriptures.

1. Hebrew Vocabulary

a. Wisdom

- 1) חֵכְמָה (chok-maw) #2451
 - a) 149 occurrences
 - b) meaning: *wisdom, skill, prudence, shrewdness*

- 2) תוֹשִׁיָּהּ (too-shiy-yaw) #8454
 - a) 12 occurrences
 - b) meaning: *sound wisdom, abiding success*
 - c) Job 12:16; Pr 2:7; 3:21; 8:14; 18:1; Micah 6:9

b. Knowledge

- 1) דַּעַת (dah-ath) #1847
 - a) from יָדַע (yaw-dah) #3045
 - b) 82 occurrences
 - c) meaning: *knowledge, perception, skill*

c. Understanding

- 1) בֵּינַי (biyn) #995
 - a) 170 occurrences
 - b) meaning: *discernment, understanding*
- 2) תְּבוּנָה (taw-voon) #8394
 - a) 43 occurrences
 - b) meaning: *intelligence, understanding*

2. Greek Vocabulary

a. Wisdom

- 1) σοφία #4678
 - a) 51 occurrences
 - b) meaning: *wisdom, functional knowledge*

b. Knowledge

- 1) γνῶσις #1108
 - a) 29 occurrences
 - b) meaning: *general knowledge*
- 2) ἐπίγνωσις #1922
 - a) 20 occurrences
 - b) meaning: *full knowledge*

c. Understanding

- 1) συνίημι #4920
 - a) 26 occurrences
 - b) meaning: *perceive clearly, understand*
- 2) νοέω #3539
 - a) meaning: *perceive, understand*
 - b) Matt 15:17; 16:9,11; Eph 3:4; 1 Tim 1:7; Heb 11:3

3) οἶδα #1492

a) meaning: *come to know, understand*

b) Mk 4:13; John 20:9; 1 Cor 11:3; Jude 10

II. Similarities and Differences

- A. God established the heavens and earth through wisdom, knowledge and understanding (Pr 3:19).
- B. True wisdom, knowledge and understanding come from God (James 3:17; 2 Chr 1:10-12; 9:23; Dan 2:20-23; 2 Tim 2:7; Pr 2:6).
- C. God will even give us the knowledge we need for our jobs (Ex 31:3-5; Dan 1:17).
- D. The Holy Spirit provides wisdom, knowledge and understanding to us (Job 32:8; Isa 11:2).
- E. Wisdom, knowledge and understanding are all necessary elements for a worthy walk (Col 1:9,10).
- F. Understanding is a prerequisite for learning (1 Cor 14:12-17).
- G. Only those who are spiritual can understand God's Word (1 Cor 2:9-14).
- H. Understanding of God's Word allows our minds to be renewed day by day (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 4:16; Eph 4:23; Col 3:10).
- I. This renewal through the knowledge of God's Word allows us to grow (1 Pet 2:2) and become more Christ-like (Col 3:10; Eph 4:15).
- J. Our growth must include grace and love, not knowledge alone (2 Pet 3:18; 1 Cor 8:1).
- K. God desires for us to come to a full knowledge of His Truth (1 Tim 2:4; Ps 51:6).
- L. Full knowledge of God's Word leads to maturity (Eph 4:13) which is expressed in love (Phil 1:9).
- M. Full knowledge and understanding produce stability (Col 2:2-8).
- N. Understanding here means a complete grasp of a subject matter.
 - 1. Acts 10:34 (καταλαμβάνω #2638)
 - 2. John 13:7 (γινώσκω #1097)
- O. We gain understanding and wisdom through instruction (Pr 1:1-7; 4:1-7; 13:10) and humility in the face of reproof (Pr 15:31-33).

P. We should act according to wisdom we are given (1 Kgs 2:6-9; Ezra 7:25).

Q. Our words will reflect our wisdom (Ps 37:30; 49:3; Pr 10:13,31; 31:26) or lack thereof (Pr 15:2,28; Ecc 10:12; James 3:10).

III. Concluding Thoughts

A. We cannot learn what we do not understand.

B. Believers in fellowship can understand spiritual truth as provided by the Holy Spirit.

C. Unless we humble ourselves before God, we cannot be taught.

D. We grow in knowledge through daily instruction in God's Word.

E. We must also grow in grace and love.

F. God wants us to have full knowledge of the truth.

G. This full knowledge comes as we mature by gaining a deeper understanding of God's Word.

H. Wisdom comes through instruction, discipline, reproof and testing.

I. Wisdom is knowledge and understanding ready for application in our daily walk.

J. If we lack wisdom for any work assignment, God will provide it to us if we ask in faith.

K. Beware of the "wisdom" of this world which is not from God.

The World, The Flesh, and The Devil

Three Enemies of The Christian's Walk

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I. Introduction

- A. The World, The Flesh and The Devil represent three battlefronts faced by the believer in his daily walk.
- B. Failure to recognize any of these realms of opposition leads to stumbling, lack of growth, discouragement, and, ultimately, loss of eternal rewards for the believer.
- C. Awareness of these realms of opposition and continual utilization of the provision God has made for facing the conflict leads to victory in the believer's life.

II. Definitions

A. The World

1. Three Hebrew words and three Greek words are often translated "world", but our study will focus on the New Testament usage of **κόσμος**.
2. The Greek word **κόσμος** can mean (1) an orderly arrangement, (2) the sum total of everything here and now, (3) humanity in general, (4) the system of human existence, (5) a realm or (6) the planet earth.
3. Our study will focus on Satan's **κόσμος** system which functions independently of God and stands in opposition to Him.

B. The Flesh

1. Two Hebrew words and one Greek word are translated "flesh", but our study will focus on the New Testament usage of **σάρξ**.
2. The Greek word **σάρξ** can mean (1) the material that covers the bones of an animal or human being, (2) the physical body, (3) a living being with flesh, (4) earthly descent, or (5) normal earthly way.
3. Our study will focus on the physical body wherein resides the transmitted sin nature.

C. The Devil

1. There are many names for the unholy archangel – Satan, Lucifer, Son of the Morning, Serpent, Dragon, Baal-zebub, Beelzebul, Devil, etc.
2. Our study will focus on the person of The Devil regardless of the name employed, although the two most common words used in the New Testament are **διάβολος** (devil) and **Σατανᾶς** (Satan).

III. Development

A. The World

1. Blinding Darkness (John 1:4-9; 3:19; 8:12; 12:35, 36, 46; 2 Cor 4:4-6; Eph 6:12; 1 John 2:8-11)
2. Counterfeit Wisdom (Isa 44:25; 1 Cor 1:18-27; 2:4-6; 3:19, 20; James 3:15-17; 1 John 4:1-6)
3. Opposed to God (John 8:19; 15:18,21; 16:3; 17:25; James 4:4; 1 John 2:16)
4. Defiling Filth (James 1:27; 2 Pet 1:4; 2:20)
5. Foreign Territory (John 17:14-16; 2 Cor 5:20; Phil 3:20)

B. The Flesh

1. Abode of Sin Nature and its Lusts (Rom 7:5, 18, 25; Eph 2:3; 1 Pet 2:11)
2. Opposed to the Spirit (Rom 8:3-8; Gal 5:17)
3. A Source of Temptation (James 1:14)

C. The Devil

1. Veils the Gospel (Luke 8:12; 2 Cor 4:3,4)
2. Tempter (Luke 4:1-13; 1 Cor 7:5)
3. Source of Human Viewpoint (Matthew 16:23; John 13:2; Acts 5:3)
4. Desires to Harm the Righteous (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; Luke 22:31; Acts 10:38; 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Pet 5:8; 1 Tim 1:20; 3:7; 2 Tim 2:26; Rev 2:10)
5. The Great Deceiver (John 8:44; Rev 12:9; 20:10)
6. Crafty Schemer (2 Cor 2:11; 11:3, 14; Eph 6:11)
7. Active Opportunist (Eph 4:27; 2 Thess 2:9)
8. Obstructor (1 Thess 2:18)

IV. Conclusion

- A. We must recognize the opposition we face as believers in the world.

B. We must also recognize that the victory has already been achieved by our Savior and that we are empowered to succeed in battle.

1. This world is reserved for destruction (1 Cor 7:31; 2 Pet 3:7, 10; 1 John 2:17; Rev 21:1)
2. The passions of the flesh have been crucified (Rom 6:6; Gal 2:20; 5:24)
3. We are freed from sin and no longer must live for our lusts (Rom 6:12-22; 8:2; 13:14; Eph 4:24; Gal 5:16; 1 Pet 1:14; 4:1, 2)
4. We have weapons against the fallen angelic forces (2 Cor 6:7; 10:3, 4; Rom 13:12; Eph 6:10-17)