

## SESSION 1: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### Session 1: All Wisdom Comes from the Lord

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**Passage:** The Prologue; Sirach 1:1-30

#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers that wisdom is not a human achievement but a gift that begins with the fear of the Lord, and meets the real human beings (a grandfather and his grandson) through whom God gave us this book.

**Catholic Touchstone:** The inspiration of Scripture and the Church as the guardian of the canon (CCC 105-108, 120).

#### What You Need to Know

Sirach is unusual among Old Testament books: we know who wrote it, roughly when, and even who translated it. Jesus Ben Sira was a scribe and teacher in Jerusalem around 200 to 175 BC, running what he calls a house of instruction (51:23). His grandson translated the book from Hebrew into Greek in Egypt sometime after 132 BC and tells us so in the Prologue, the only translator's preface in the whole Bible. For centuries the Hebrew original was thought lost, but large portions resurfaced in the Cairo Genizah in 1896 and later at Masada and Qumran, confirming the book was composed in Hebrew and letting scholars compare the Greek with substantial Hebrew witnesses, which broadly agree while showing normal textual variation.

The book opens with the theme that governs everything that follows: all wisdom comes from the Lord (1:1), and the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (1:14). Fear here is not terror of a tyrant. Ben Sira immediately pairs it with gladness, joy, and long life (1:11-13), having just said wisdom is poured out on those who love him (1:10). It is the reverence of a son who knows his father is God, the posture that makes a person teachable. This session plants the question the whole study will keep asking: where do I go to become wise, and what does it cost me?

Be ready for the canon question, because someone will ask why this book is not in their Protestant friend's Bible. Do not resolve it tonight. Acknowledge it warmly, note that the Church has read this book since the beginning (its old Latin name, *Ecclesiasticus*, means roughly the church book), and tell the group we will take that question head-on in our final session, with the strongest objections given a fair hearing. Planting the question now and paying it off in Session 12 is deliberate.

#### OT Roots and Fulfillment

Sirach 1 stands in the stream of Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10 (the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and of knowledge) and Job 28:28. Ben Sira gathers Israel's whole wisdom tradition and hands it forward. Wisdom personified in 1:4 and 1:9 (created before all things, poured out upon all creation) picks up Proverbs 8:22-31, a thread Christian tradition reads as pointing to and fulfilled in Christ, the eternal and uncreated Wisdom of God (John 1:1-3; 1 Corinthians 1:24): the created poetic figure is not simply identical with the eternal Son, a distinction Session 8 teaches carefully. Do not reveal that fulfillment tonight: it is the payoff of Session 8 and of the sealed guess.

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Augustine of Hippo

Augustine opens his Confessions with the insight that frames this whole study: God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in him. The search for wisdom is finally a search for God, and it begins when we stop pretending we are its source.

*Confessions, Book I, 1 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas distinguishes servile fear, which dreads punishment, from filial fear, which dreads being separated from the Father we love. Even imperfect fear, he teaches, can begin a soul's movement toward wisdom, and filial fear belongs to wisdom's flowering: fear matures alongside love rather than shrinking as love grows.

*Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 19 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Francis de Sales

Francis insisted that the pursuit of wisdom and devotion is not reserved for monks and priests. Every state of life, the soldier, the tradesman, the married person, can and must seek holiness where it stands. Ben Sira, teaching ordinary learners the way of wisdom in daily life, breathes the same conviction.

*Introduction to the Devout Life, Part I (paraphrased)*

## Catechism Connection

- **CCC 105-108:** God is the author of Sacred Scripture; the inspired books teach the truth God wanted written for our salvation.
- **CCC 120:** The Church discerned and receives the complete canon of Scripture, including the 46 books of the Old Testament.
- **CCC 1831:** Fear of the Lord is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit that complete and perfect the virtues.

## Thread Watch

- **PLANT (Fear of the Lord):** 1:11-20 introduces fear of the Lord as wisdom's root, crown, and fullness. Let the group notice the surprising pairing of fear with joy. This matures across the study and resolves in Session 12.
- **PLANT (Who is Wisdom?):** 1:4 and 1:9-10 speak of Wisdom as created before all things and poured out on all creation. Someone may ask who or what this Wisdom is. Smile and say: hold that question, you will write down your guess tonight. Resolves in Session 8.
- **PLANT (Why is this book in my Bible?):** The Prologue raises the book's unusual history. Acknowledge, do not resolve. Resolves in Session 12.

## Session Goals

1. Meet Ben Sira and his grandson through the Prologue and establish when, where, and why the book was written.
2. Discover from chapter 1 that wisdom originates in God alone and is given, not achieved.
3. Define the fear of the Lord from the text itself, noticing its pairing with joy and love.
4. Plant the three long threads: fear of the Lord, the identity of Wisdom, and the book's place in the canon.
5. Have each participant seal a written guess: who or what is Wisdom in this book?

## Time Note

90 minutes. If running long, cut Build question 6 (the Prologue's three-part shape) and the second Dig Deeper box; do not cut the sealed guess, which the whole study depends on.

## SESSION 1: DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Session 1: All Wisdom Comes from the Lord

#### Opening Prayer

*Father of all wisdom, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. As we open this book tonight, open our minds to understand it and our hearts to obey it. Give us the reverence that is the beginning of wisdom and the love that is its crown. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

#### Win: Opening Questions

**Win 1.** If you could sit down for one hour with the wisest person you have ever known, living or dead, who would it be, and what would you ask?

**Win 2.** Where does our culture tell you to go when you need wisdom for a big decision? How well has that worked for you?

#### Build: Into the Text

##### LIVE DISCOVERY

**1.** Turn to the Prologue, the short preface before chapter 1 (in most RSV2CE Bibles it sits unnumbered before 1:1). Read it aloud together. Playing detective, what can we learn from this page alone about who wrote this book, who translated it, when, where, and why?

##### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The author is the translator's grandfather, Jesus (Yeshua) Ben Sira, a devoted student of the Law, the Prophets, and the other books of the fathers. The grandson came to Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of King Euergetes (132 BC) and translated the Hebrew into Greek there, apologizing that translations never fully capture the original. His stated purpose is that lovers of learning might make greater progress in living according to the Law.

Leader note: this is the only translator's preface in the Bible, and it gives us a rare window into how Scripture physically reached us: written by a human author under inspiration, copied, translated, carried between nations, and guarded by the believing community.

**2.** Read Sirach 1:1-10. According to Ben Sira, where does all wisdom come from, and where does it remain forever? What questions does he ask in verses 2-3 and 6, and what do they do to the reader?

##### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

All wisdom comes from the Lord and is with him for ever (1:1). The unanswerable questions (who can count the sand of the sea, who has searched out the height of heaven, to whom has wisdom's root been revealed?) humble the reader before we have even begun. Wisdom is not scaled by human effort; God alone possesses it and pours it out on those who love him (1:9-10).

3. Read Sirach 1:11-13. List every good thing these three verses attach to the fear of the Lord. Does the list surprise you? Why or why not?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Glory, exultation, gladness, and a crown of rejoicing (1:11); long life, a rejoicing heart, wellbeing at the end of life, blessing at death (1:12-13). The surprise is the register: we expect fear to produce anxiety, and instead it produces delight. This is our first clue that fear of the Lord means something richer than being scared of God.

4. Now read 1:14-20. Ben Sira builds a whole anatomy of wisdom around the fear of the Lord. What is fear of the Lord called in verse 14? In verse 16? In verse 18? In verse 20? Putting the images together, how would you define the fear of the Lord in your own words?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

It is the beginning of wisdom (1:14), the fullness of wisdom (1:16), the crown of wisdom (1:18), and the root of wisdom (1:20). Beginning, root, fullness, crown: it is not a stage you outgrow but the soil, trunk, and fruit all at once. A working definition: reverence that takes God seriously as God, real awe before his majesty, which grace matures into the loving reverence of a child before a good father whom it would be unthinkable to grieve.

Press gently: is this compatible with loving God? Verse 12 already answered: the fear of the Lord delights the heart.

## LIVE DISCOVERY

5. Ben Sira did not invent this idea. Split into pairs: one pair find Proverbs 9:10, another Proverbs 1:7, another Job 28:28, another Psalm 111:10. Read them aloud in turn. What is Ben Sira doing with Israel's older Scriptures?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Be precise with what each says: Proverbs 9:10 and Psalm 111:10 call the fear of the Lord the beginning of wisdom; Proverbs 1:7 calls it the beginning of knowledge; Job 28:28 says the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom. Ben Sira is deliberately gathering and handing on the received wisdom of Israel: he is a link in a living chain of teaching. This matters for later: it is exactly how the Church understands Tradition, the faithful handing on of what was received (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

6. Look back over the Prologue with fresh eyes. The grandson names the Law, the Prophets, and the other books of our fathers three separate times. What does that tell us about how Israel already thought about its Scriptures in 132 BC, and what question does it raise about this very book?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Israel already recognized a body of sacred writings in familiar groupings. And here is the wrinkle: the grandson translated an already-treasured Hebrew work so Greek-speaking Jews could live by it, and the Church would later discern its place among the sacred books. That raises the question someone has probably already asked: who decides which books are in the Bible? Name the question, promise it a full and fair hearing in our last session, and move on.

7. Read 1:26-27. What is the relationship between keeping the commandments and receiving wisdom? What does that suggest about someone who wants to become wise while keeping God at arm's length?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments, and the Lord will supply it (1:26). Wisdom is given to the obedient, not the merely curious. You cannot audit this course; wisdom is learned by apprenticeship to God. This is why the fear of the Lord comes first: without reverence there is no obedience, and without obedience there is no wisdom.

## THE SEALED GUESS

Before we close: in chapter 1 we met a mysterious figure, Wisdom, created before all things, poured out on all creation, given to those who love the Lord. This book will keep talking about her, and in Session 8 she will give a long speech in her own voice.

**On your Take-Home sheet tonight there is a box labeled My Guess. Before next week, write your answer to this question and do not show anyone: Who or what do you think Wisdom really is in this book? Fold the sheet or keep it hidden. We will open the guesses together in Session 8.**

## Dig Deeper

### **DIG DEEPER: The book with three names**

You will see this book called Sirach (from the author's name), Ecclesiasticus (the old Latin title, roughly the church book: traditionally explained by the Church's heavy use of it in instruction), and The Wisdom of Ben Sira. Same book. The abundance of names is itself evidence of how widely the Church has loved and used it.

### **DIG DEEPER: The Hebrew that came back from the dead**

For centuries the Hebrew original was thought lost, while Greek, Latin, Syriac, and other versions carried the book. Then in 1896 scholars identified medieval Hebrew copies of Sirach in the storeroom (genizah) of a Cairo synagogue, and in 1964 excavators at Masada found Hebrew Sirach scrolls from before AD 73. About two thirds of the Hebrew text has been recovered. God preserved his word along paths no one predicted.

## Send: Taking It Out

**Send 1.** Ben Sira says wisdom is given to those who fear the Lord, not to those who merely want to feel wise. What is one area of your life where you have been seeking answers without actually being willing to obey what you might hear?

**Send 2.** Who is one person God has placed in your life as a Ben Sira, a handed-on of wisdom? What would it look like to actually sit at their feet this month?

## Live It This Week

- Each day this week, before you open your phone in the morning, pray one sentence: Lord, give me the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom.
- Write your sealed My Guess answer on the Take-Home sheet and bring it back every week without showing anyone.
- Read the Prologue and Sirach 1 once more on your own, slowly, and underline every word connected to joy or gladness. Count them.

## Closing Prayer

*Lord God, source of all wisdom, thank you for the scribe who wrote and the grandson who translated, and for the Church that carried this book across twenty-two centuries into our hands. Teach us to fear you as sons and daughters, not as slaves, and let that reverence blossom into joy. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## Scripture Memory Verse

"To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; she is created with the faithful in the womb." (**Sirach 1:14**)

**Before next session:** Read Sirach 2 (it is short, 18 verses). Read it twice.

## SESSION 1: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

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#### Principal passages in order of use:

6. The Prologue to Sirach
7. Sirach 1:1-10
8. Sirach 1:11-13
9. Sirach 1:14-20
10. Proverbs 9:10
11. Proverbs 1:7
12. Job 28:28
13. Psalm 111:10
14. Sirach 1:26-27
15. 2 Thessalonians 2:15 (leader reference)

**Memory verse:** Sirach 1:14, "To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; she is created with the faithful in the womb."