

The Fear of God

But there is forgiveness with you, that you may be feared.
(Ps 130:4)

Forgiveness leads to fear!

This may seem shocking to some, but it is what this scripture clearly states. The Hebrew words emphasise that forgiveness is specifically for the sake of, or with the intent or purpose of, leading the forgiven one to fear God. The end of receiving mercy and pardon is the fear of God.

What is this fear? Is it merely reverence? Does this verse simply mean that forgiven ones honour God respectfully when they worship him? Well of course it means this, but it means a great deal more also.

Biblical fear of God is not just reverence. The Hebrew verb used here means: to be afraid, to stand in awe of, to be full of dread, to revere; and the KJV even translates it as 'terrible' 23 times.¹ In the New Testament the word used is *phobeo* from whence we derive 'phobia' which means a dread of something. *Phobeo* means to terrify, to be scared.²

Now it is clear that justification produces holiness. Those who are genuinely converted, and pardoned live holy lives. Those who truly find mercy in Christ develop filial fear and love for God. The redeemed are led from cursing God to worshipping him; they honour Jesus as Lord and praise the God who gave them mercy. But there should be more than this.

Fear God

Fearing God is the natural state for created beings. After the fall, man ceased to fear God and rebelled against his commands, so the wicked are those who do not fear God; indeed they despise him. When a person finds God's mercy, he is brought back into a right relationship with God and fears his creator/redeemer. God is even twice called 'the fear of Isaac' (Gen 31:42, 53).

When an OT saint was identified as a servant of the Lord, it was said that he 'feared God'. Noah was moved with godly fear (Heb 11:7), Abraham feared God (Gen 22:12), Joseph feared God (Gen 42:18), the rulers of Israel in the wilderness were men that feared God (Ex 18:21), Job was identified as a servant of the Lord because he feared God (Job 1:9). Foreign converts to the God of Israel were called those who feared God (Acts 13:16,26). The apostles' command to disciples was to fear God (1 Pt 2:17); while the angel who preaches the everlasting Gospel to those on the earth commands men to fear God (Rev 14:7). The final burst of heavenly praise for God after the destruction of Babylon and before the marriage feast of the lamb is from those who fear God both small and great (Rev 19:5).

¹ **arey'** *yare'*; Strong's no. 3372.

² **fobe,w** *phobeo*; Strong's no. 5399 from 5401. The noun form is *phobos*, fear, dread, terror.

Israel's enemies were described as not fearing God (e.g. the Amalekites Deut 25:18; David's foes Ps 55:19), indeed the wicked will be judged because they do not fear God (Eccles 8:12). In fact, after evaluating all the pros and cons of life, Solomon the preacher tells us that: *the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all.* (Eccles 12:13)

In all these cases modern Christians would probably have used the term 'worship God' instead of 'fear God', yet our wiser forefathers were clear that the phrase 'fear God' was better. Why are we so wary of fearing God?

Fear undergirds service to God

We need to understand that the fear of God is pervasive in the history of redemption. Not only is it repeatedly mentioned affirmatively in the Old Testament, but also we see that fear is a result of many aspects of the Spirit's work in the New.

In Acts 2:43 the result of three thousand people being converted was: baptisms, growth in teaching sound doctrine, fellowship, prayer, breaking of bread *and fear coming upon every soul* as miracles were performed. The Greek tense implies that *fear kept on coming* as the Spirit worked wonders. The greater the work, the more fear was engendered.

2 Cor 5:11 *Knowing, therefore, the terror [phobos] of the Lord, we persuade men.* The context of this verse is the service we perform for God, and generally pleasing God, which results in rewards or loss. The basis of good works is the fear of God.

In Eph 5:21 we learn that we must submit to one another in the fear of God. We must be careful to understand and learn what God is doing in each person, never criticising or overriding one without good reason, for we may be going against God if we ignore a brother.

Heb 12:28 shows us that we only serve God acceptably if we serve with reverence and godly fear. [Here two different words are used; reverence = *aidos*, godly fear = *eulabeia*.]

1 Pt 1:17: in this verse Peter, like Solomon, addresses our whole life. All of our service, every thought, all of our speech and actions, indeed everything we do must be done in fear. Every aspect of our pilgrimage in this world must be conducted in fear.

The fear of God is a constituent of sanctification

perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor 7:1)

A person cannot grow in holiness without knowing the fear of God. The basis of practical holiness is a desire to please God by obeying his commandments and fearing his displeasure by disobeying his will. This means putting God's will above our own desires and needs. This may sometimes involve hard choices, but the fear of God will ensure that God's will has first place. Someone who claims to be holy and serve God, but shows no fear of God, is an impostor.

Salvation is to be worked out with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12); it is not a casual matter. Christians are those who stand in the presence of the God who created the universe out of nothing, they are in a truly awe inspiring place, they cannot conduct

their lives glibly or foolishly. Since believers are meant to be a testimony to the character of God, everything they do has an impact somewhere. How great and awesome is this privilege. Such a responsibility demands fear and trembling - we must take care how we live.

Analogy - fatherhood

What is meant by fearing God is not servitude in abject terror. It is not living in the sort of panic an arachnophobe³ feels in the insect house at the zoo, or someone with vertigo feels on a roof. It is rather the fear a son has for his father. The filial relationship is based upon love not terror, the father loves his son and the son loves his father. However, the father has no fear of the son (he may fear *for* him) but the son certainly has fear of the father. The son fears displeasing his father, he wants to be in his good books; he fears punishment if he steps out of line; he respects him and gives him the honour a father deserves. Fear and love in this case go together; love is the foundation of the relationship, but a healthy fear in the son ensures that the relationship grows correctly. Without fear a son becomes a rebel.

In the same way Christians are sons of God; their bond with God is based upon a love relationship, established by being placed into Christ. Love undergirds all their associations with God their Father, however, the development of the son is ensured by his filial fear of God. Because he fears God, the son will always obey his Father's commands, always give God his due reverence and honour, and be afraid of ever displeasing him in any way. The relationship is not based upon fear, rather upon love, but it is conducted in fear in this life.

Fear ensures development in life

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov 1:7)

In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence, and His children will have a place of refuge. The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death. (Prov 14:26-27)

Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. (Ps 34:11)

Infants learn how to cope with life through healthy fears. The first time they cut themselves they learn to fear sharp items; the first time they burn themselves they fear flames; the first time they scald themselves they fear boiling water. These are healthy fears and they lead to wisdom. Teenagers that do not fear the law or policemen are fools and become delinquents. The fear of punishment is one foundation of a stable society.

The same is true of spiritual life. If we want to learn about God, we must begin with fearing him and desiring to obey his statutes. There is no growth in knowledge of God without a prior fear of him. The liberal claims of university theology professors and modernist bishops show they are fools, as when they state that God is dead or that Jesus was not born of a virgin. They make these claims, dressed up in academic words, because there is no fear of God in their eyes.

The fear of God is a fountain of life; it leads to greater and greater apprehension of spiritual things. Where there is no demonstration of the fear of God in a person, their spiritual claims are shown to be fabricated or even demonic. For instance, when

³ Someone who is terrified of spiders.

professing believers claim to have spiritual power or a message from heaven and yet manifest an appalling casual attitude towards God and behave immodestly, it is clear that the lack of godly fear is an identification of a lack of genuine spiritual life.

Fear of God is vital for church growth and edification

Then the churches throughout all Judaea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied. (Acts 9:31)

But to you who fear my name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings; and you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves. (Mal 4:2)

Churches that walk in the fear of God grow. The characteristics of these growing churches (which had recently suffered persecution) were:

- **THEY WERE EDIFIED** - they were being built up in doctrine and love. The apostolic letters show that this is done through mutual edification in fellowship - where believers are submitting to one another in the fear of God, and the application of teaching.
- **THEY WALKED IN THE FEAR OF THE LORD.**
- **THEY WALKED IN THE COMFORT OF THE SPIRIT.** 'Comfort' here is *paraklesis*⁴ which means 'a calling near', 'an exhortation, admonition, consolation'. This is the ministry of the Spirit, to draw alongside and give us whatever we need to keep going. This may be comfort or a kick in the pants. The person who fears God trusts him for the right kind of exhortation and receives it.

So a healthy fear of God is a foundation stone in the life of growing churches. How shocking, then, to discover a trend in some evangelical churches that emphasises a total eradication of fear for God. Instead they focus upon: the love of God while avoiding his holiness; the blessings of salvation rather than the responsibilities; what God can do for us rather than what we must do for God and the comforts of spiritual life rather than striving against sin.

Worse still these churches talk of God like some friendly uncle and refer to the Lord Jesus as their 'mate' or 'buddy'. Although we are commanded to enter boldly into God's presence in Hebrews 4:16, we can never be familiar or disrespectful. We are there to worship God the creator and Lord of the Universe, never forgetting that the same writer speaks of God as 'a consuming fire', commanding that we approach him with fear and reverence (Heb 12:28-29). This modern trend is shocking and usually goes hand in hand with a focus upon the needs of sinners in church services (seeker-sensitive practices).

Conclusion

The church today is in a terrible state: numbers are declining in every denomination; church leaders are being caught in awful sins; churches are held in disrepute by the world; doctrinal errors are rampant and spiritual abuses abound. I submit that the main cause of all this is that both church leaders and members no longer have any concern for the fear of the Lord.

Many things that are tolerated with ease today would have been avoided yesterday out of fear for the Lord. No godly preacher can stand before a crowd of eager listeners, claiming that God is standing before them, and yet fear the Lord. No man can knock down waves of people by 'blowing the Spirit' upon them from a platform and still be in

⁴ **para,klhsij** *paraklesis*, Strong's no. 3874 from 3870.

fear of God. No leader could deprive poor people of their savings, in exchange for a promise of healing, and still fear the Lord. Yet all these things are now common.

New Testament apostles who had the greatest assurances of God's blessing were the ones that also stressed the vital importance of godly fear. It was the phobia of God that led Paul to try to persuade men about the Gospel. He did not merely seek to please God by preaching, he feared God should he fail to fulfil his ministry. What the church needs to recover above all else is the fear of the Lord.

Appendix

What about verses which contradict this argument that fear is vital to the Christian walk such as 1 Jn 4:18?

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. (1 Jn 4:18)

This verse is not talking about our service to God but is a comparison of filial love and legal obligation. In the previous verses John mentions love as giving boldness on the Day of Judgment. He is saying that those who are in a true relationship with God love God and are loved by Him. This gives confidence for the Day of Judgment that they will not suffer torment (lit. 'punishment'). Those who do fear the torment of judgment do not truly love God and do not truly know God's love for them but are only serving God legalistically, not from the heart. This kind of fear is not Christian, but is unbelieving fear. Godly fear is the fear of a son to his father, this fear is the fear of a slave expecting punishment.

Adam Clarke's commentary on this verse adds:

We are not to suppose that the love of God casts out every kind of fear from the soul; it only casts out that which has torment.

- 1. A filial fear is consistent with the highest degrees of love; and even necessary to the preservation of that grace. This is properly its guardian; and, without this, love would soon degenerate into listlessness, or presumptive boldness.*
- 2. Nor does it cast out that fear which is so necessary to the preservation of life; that fear which leads a man to flee from danger lest his life should be destroyed.*
- 3. Nor does it cast out that fear which may be engendered by sudden alarm. All these are necessary to our well being. But it destroys,*
 - 3.1. The fear of want;*
 - 3.2. The fear of death; and*
 - 3.3. The fear or terror of judgment. All these fears bring torment, and are inconsistent with this perfect love.*

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