

The Meaning of the Fear of the Lord

What comes into your mind when you hear those words, “the fear of the Lord”? Is it a positive thought? An unpleasant one? Or maybe something uncertain, unclear, unsure of what it means?

At first, to hear that revival is when the fear of the Lord comes upon us corporately or individually may not sound like good news to you. After all, fear does not sound like something we want. We work hard to escape our fears, alleviate our fears, remove our fears, we don't usually pursue them.

We don't want to be terrified, feel threatened, sense danger, or be scared. And because of the negativity of fear, some shallow Bible teachers have been quick to dismiss the fear of the Lord as an Old Testament thing, or something that really has no element of fear in it, as if the Bible just chose the wrong word. They often ask, doesn't John tell us in I John 4:18 that perfect love casts out fear? Didn't Paul tell Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:7: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”(2Ti 1:7). Isn't Jesus recorded as having said ‘Fear not’ at least seven times in the Gospels?

The answer is *yes*, all those things are true. But since Scripture does not contradict Scripture, we must reason there is a kind of fear God does not want us to have, and there is a kind of fear He does want us to have. In fact, you see these two ideas in one verse in Matthew 10:28: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”(Mat 10:28)

The fear of God is both similar and different to the kind of fear we want to avoid. Today, we want to consider three characteristics of the fear of the Lord, as we look through the Bible to find texts on this topic. As you know, the Bible is packed full of references to fearing God, being in awe, reverencing, honouring, trembling, bowing, so we really want to try to boil it down to its essentials today. Revival corporately and individually is taking place when these three are characterising us.

I. Fear of the Lord is the Right Response to God's Nature

Job 38:1 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said:

² "Who *is* this who darkens counsel By words without knowledge?

³ Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me.

⁴ "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell *Me*, if you have understanding.

⁵ Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?

⁶ To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone,

⁷ When the morning stars sang together, And all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:1-7)

¹⁹ "Where *is* the way to the dwelling of light? And darkness, where *is* its place,

²⁰ That you may take it to its territory, That you may know the paths *to* its home?

²¹ Do you know *it*, because you were born then, Or *because* the number of your days *is* great?

²² "Have you entered the treasury of snow, Or have you seen the treasury of hail,

²³ Which I have reserved for the time of trouble, For the day of battle and war?

²⁴ By what way is light diffused, Or the east wind scattered over the earth?

²⁵ "Who has divided a channel for the overflowing *water*, Or a path for the thunderbolt,

²⁶ To cause it to rain on a land *where there is* no one, A wilderness in which *there is* no man;

(Job 38:19-26)

Here is Job, after having gone through a terrible trial of losing all his goods, his family and his health. He spent hours proclaiming his innocence before three of his friends who insisted he was evil. Along the way, he kept demanding that God explain His actions and give an account of Himself.

Finally, in chapter 38, God does speak, and instead of answering Job's questions, He asks Job about seventy of His own. They are questions designed to confront Job with God's greatness as Creator

and Sustainer, and also His goodness and wisdom in caring for His creation. He pummels Job with one question after another about creation, questions that only God can answer. He confronts Job with His power and with His gentle love for His creation. The answer to Job's questions is not why it happened, but who was in control of it, who was behind it, who allowed it.

As Job sees both the power and the love of God, he experiences the fear of the Lord.

Job 42:1 Then Job answered the LORD and said:

² "I know that You can do everything, And that no purpose *of Yours* can be withheld from You.

³ *You asked*, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

⁴ Listen, please, and let me speak; *You said*, 'I will question you, and you shall answer Me.'

⁵ "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, But now my eye sees You.

⁶ Therefore I abhor *myself*, And repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:1-6)

Job is humbled, submitted to God, repentant over his sin, but also grateful that he has been spared and answered, dependent and hopeful.

In Scripture, the fear of the Lord is the experience of someone who sees both God's greatness and God's goodness at the same time. With God there is both dread, and wonder, at the same time.

Anyone who tells you that there is nothing in God to be afraid of hasn't read his Bible at all. People who encountered God trembled. The Bible speaks of the terror of the Lord. It speaks of people being afraid in His presence, falling at His feet. When Moses saw God at Mount Sinai, Hebrews 12 records, "²¹ And so terrifying was the sight *that* Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling."

³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb. 10:30-31)

¹¹ Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, *so is* Your wrath. (Ps. 90:11)

To encounter this God is to encounter power without end. You have encountered a fraction of God's power in nature. If a loud thunderstorm has begun to make you feel nervous, if you have been travelling through a storm where the noise and water began to seem overpowering, if you have been in, as I have, a mild to more severe earthquake, and felt the very ground tremble underneath you, if you've have been in the ocean itself, either as a swimmer or as a sailor, and encountering waves, or currents that are too big or strong for you; if you have been in a typhoon or powerful storm, possibly being near a tornado or hurricane area, and hearing and feeling the power of the wind. During those experiences, you feel your vulnerability before such power. For a brief time, you realise you are in the presence of a power much greater than yourself, and it confronts you with your weakness, your mortality, your insignificance. You realise you are in danger, and your lack of power to save yourself or help yourself fills you with fear.

Those storms and demonstrations of power, the book of Job says, "*are* the mere edges of His ways, And how small a whisper we hear of Him! (Job 26:14)

In other words, those are not even God really flexing His muscles. He's hardly clearing His throat, and yet we tremble in those moments. His power does not come from outside of Him, and He never needs to replenish it; He is self-sufficient. His power does not grow or develop, because it is infinite already, and never changes, because He always has been and always will be.

God's greatness is more than power. Accompanying this power is a perfect knowledge of everything you do and have done. Accompanying this power is His absolute standard of right and wrong, a standard He is tirelessly vigilant to maintain. He does not tolerate violations of His glory, rejection of His authority, ingratitude for His goodness. All this greatness can and will be exercised against those who sin against Him. God is very displeased when His own creation should thumb their noses

at Him. His anger is a furious displeasure that will seek to right the wrongs and restore equity, balance and order to His universe. Now if all this power is going to be exercised against sinners, the question is: who falls into that category? The answer is: you do, and so do I.

That is why no one should say that the fear of the Lord does not include any kind of fear. Of course it does. This God is a dangerous God. He can and will destroy sinners. This is far worse than facing the threat of lightning or a storm or a wave. Those can kill us, but at least they are simply impersonal forces. This is a Person, with all this power, arrayed against those who sin. We appear to be targets for this enormous power.

But the fear of the Lord is not only dread, terror, being afraid. If that was it, the Bible wouldn't tell us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and that it is man's whole duty.

The fear of the Lord includes seeing amidst all that power, a friendly face. That is, this God with such resources, wants our good, and is kindly disposed to us. This same God will endure your wrongs again and again, and give you chance after chance before judging you. This God does not have to, but wants to see you blessed and joyful and living in peace. This God invents pleasure after pleasure to be kind to you, to delight you. This same God desires to rescue you from your evil, clean you up, write off your debts, give you a second chance, a fresh start. With all this power, He has the tenderness, gentleness and meekness of one who could handle the fragile and the breakable with the perfect touch.

When you see that those are not two gods, but one God, the combination of dread and delight, of being afraid and in awe, of feeling threatened and safe, of being astonished and amazed, that is the fear of the Lord. You sense your insignificance, your smallness, your weakness in the face of a power much greater than you. You realise this great power could wipe you out. But then you behold the goodness of God, and His disposition toward you, and it calms your heart and there is joy – you are in the presence of this overwhelming power, but this power smiles upon you. And the emotion left over is the amazed, floored, overwhelmed sense of joyful, grateful awe called the fear of the Lord.

“It is a throne of grace that God in Christ is represented to us upon; but yet it is a throne still whereon majesty and glory do reside, and God is always to be considered by us as on a throne.”— John Owen

Perhaps the best single verse that describes what the fear of the Lord is like is Psalm 2:1 Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling. Rejoice with trembling. Trembling joy. Gladness with gravity. Satisfaction with sobriety. Rejoicing with reverence.

We see this response to God's glory whenever people saw the true nature of God. Isaiah responded like this when he saw a vision of God's glory in the Temple. He saw the seraphim proclaiming God's greatness, and he cried out, “Woe is me, I am ruined!” and then a seraphim took a coal from the altar, and touched him, symbolising his forgiveness and cleansing through Messiah. And then Isaiah wanted to volunteer for service: “Here am I, send me!” Peter responded like this when Jesus did the miracle of the fishes, and Peter realised that infinite greatness and infinite goodness were in the boat with him there, and he said, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man”. And then Jesus said, “Fear not, from now on you will catch men.” And Peter forsook everything, and followed him.

In fact, people seek smaller versions of the same thing. Humans, on a fairly regular basis seek to almost reproduce that emotion of being overwhelmed, of being terrified, so long as they know they will actually be safe and come out of it fine. They climb enormous mountains. They explore incredible natural vistas. They attempt dangerous feats and adventure sports. They seek out movies or music that will fill them with wonder and awe. They even seek it in relationships, or in doing what is forbidden or bizarre, in hopes of experiencing awe and wonder. But all of that just shows

we were made in God's image, and were made for the experience of fearing the Lord.

But why then do people not naturally come to the fear of the Lord? If they are made for this experience of awe, why do they not experience it with God, and look for it everywhere else?

II. The Fear of the Lord is Rightly Revealed At the Cross

³ If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? ⁴ But *there is* forgiveness with You, That You may be feared. (Ps. 130:3-4)

Here we are told that if God only recorded our sins and never forgave them, no one could stand before Him. But because there is forgiveness, He can be feared. That's interesting. We didn't expect it to say that forgiveness brings fear. We might have thought justice brings fear. Or perhaps forgiveness brings relief. But here we read that because God has forgiveness, He may be feared.

This shows us that it is only when we find the gracious forgiveness of God, that we come to the fear of the Lord. You see, people do one of two wrong things with the knowledge of God and of their conscience. Some of them suppress that truth of God. They pretend He is not there.

There is no fear of God before his eyes. (Ps. 36:1).

¹¹ He has said in his heart, "God has forgotten; He hides His face; He will never see." (Ps. 10:11)
He acts as if God is non-existent, or if He exists He is unconcerned with us, or powerless to judge us, or too sentimental to inflict harm. He is like a man standing on the railway tracks with a train bearing down on him, while he closes his eyes and says, "There is no train. There is no train." But reality will collide with him, and so with all those who live without the fear of God.

The other way people live is to live in terror of God's judgement, aware of the evils they have done, deeply guilty in conscience, and then they run themselves ragged trying to escape that judgement on their own. They choose a religion that supposedly placates God with rituals, routines. Their consciences are rubbed raw with confessions and indulgences and fasts and pilgrimages. Some of them run from judgement with distractions: drugs, alcohol, entertainment, money, pleasure, trying to run faster even while their guilt always seems to be overtaking them.

Now this is why God's forgiveness is the true fear of the Lord. Only in the biblical gospel do we have a God of infinite holiness and power, who threatens, judges and punishes, but there on the Cross of Calvary, the very same God rescues, extends a saving arm, pardons. On the Cross, God's justice is satisfied without a hint of sentimentality. On the Cross, God's love is satisfied without a hint of cruelty. There in Jesus, in the God-Man, do you see greatness and goodness, meekness and majesty, a lionlike Lamb and a Lamblike lion, the greatest Lord, and the greatest Servant, total control, and total submission. At Calvary, power and kindness intersect, goodness and greatness intersect, justice and mercy intersect, fittingly on a beam of intersecting wood, where the two hands of God are spread out.

There we want to flee from Him, but those outstretched arms overwhelm us, and we flee to Him.

The one who rejects the gospel can only know parts of God, but never the true fear of the Lord. He can know the terror of Hell from a distance. He can know the goodness of God in the beauty of the world from a distance. But he will always distort it: either seeing God's greatness as something terrible, unjust, and unfair, or seeing God's goodness as something weak, sentimental, and permissive. There is only one way that you achieve this balance between God's greatness and God's goodness: when you accept the biblical gospel, by accepting what this great God says of you, and accepting what this good God has done for you.

In fact, God tells Israel that only the work of regeneration can bring about the true fear of the Lord.

³⁸ `They shall be My people, and I will be their God; ³⁹ `then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them. ⁴⁰ `And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me. (Jer. 32:38-40)

When you have accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour, you know and have found the fear of the Lord. You experience astonished awe, gratitude with grief, trembling joy, rejoicing reverence, that such a God could love you in such a way.

In the Bible, often the fear of the Lord is a way of describing someone who is in a saving relationship with God. Especially in the Old Testament, it is a more or less a title: those who fear the Lord are those who know the Lord. God-fearers are God's people, in covenant with Him.

God describes Job with these words; “ My servant Job, that *there is* none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?” (Job 1:8)

When Jonah is asked by the foreign sailors on the boat who he is and where he is from, he identifies himself this way: "I *am* a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry *land*." (Jon. 1:9)

In the New Testament, the term *God-fearers* was actually a title used of Gentiles who attended the synagogue and believed in the God of Israel, but had not formally converted and become proselytes, become Jewish. In the synagogue at Pisidia, Paul began by saying, “¹⁶ Then Paul stood up, and motioning with *his* hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: (Acts 13:16)
"Men *and* brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, (Acts 13:26)

This tells you that any gospel which does not include both God's greatness, and God's goodness meeting at Calvary, and resulting in the joyful fear of the Lord, is not the biblical gospel. Revelation 14 predicts the only time when an angel will preach the gospel to the world. Listen to how this heavenly messenger summarises the gospel:

⁶ Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth-- to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people-- ⁷ saying with a loud voice, "Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water." (Rev. 14:6-7)

Any gospel that presents God as less than infinitely great, and dreadfully dangerous, and anything less than infinitely good, and overwhelmingly loving is not the biblical gospel. The title of a book that came out a few years ago has part of the answer “The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity.” Many people preach a very manageable God, a very tame, controllable God, and so the approach to such a tame God is casual, chatty, informal, even fun. He fits right into their secular life. And frankly, when you begin to think of God this way, it is not long before you are bored with Him. A God who cannot overwhelm you, a God who is tame, a God who is predictably manageable, is not a God you fear, not a God you flee from or flee to.

Remember in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, when the children first hear that Aslan is a lion, they are surprised. "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"... "Safe?" said Mr Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

The fear of the Lord is the right response to who God is. The fear of the Lord is rightly revealed at

the cross; only through His work can you begin to truly fear the Lord.

But there is one more thing to say about the fear of the Lord

III. The Fear of the Lord is Rightly Recognising God's Presence

After Jacob has his dream in which God speaks to him, he wakes up and says, “¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know *it*." ¹⁷ And he was afraid and said, "How awesome *is* this place! This *is* none other than the house of God, and this *is* the gate of heaven!" (Gen. 28:16-17)

Jacob had been in God's presence but did not realise it.

You can have all that theory about God correct. You can understand God's greatness and goodness. You can be truly saved, and have a sense of how those two meet and combine at the cross. But all of that can become nothing more than a distant thought without the third truth of the fear of the Lord.

Those in the conscious fear of the Lord recognise that this God, whom they claim they know through the Son, is here. He is not somewhere else. He is in this room. He knows my thoughts. He can hear my motives. All I do is seen by Him, all I say is heard by Him, my every moment is taken before Him.

Ask yourself, how much does your behaviour change when someone else walks in the room?

The difference between the children in the classroom when the teacher is out the room and when the teacher steps back into the room is the presence of the teacher. The difference on your speedometer when there is no metro cop and when there is a metro cop is the presence of the metro cop. The difference between what two yell at each other and what they say once a pastor or deacon suddenly calls is the presence of that deacon. What things we look at, watch on our screens, but quickly close them because a parent or a spouse or someone else walks in. The language we use, and the topics we discuss, but then quickly change when it is a pastor we're talking to.

Those things mean we are not fearing the Lord and aware of His presence. If we could do those things and then stop only when another human entered the picture, it means we were unaware of God's presence all along. For us, God was absent, and that's why we could do those things.

This is why God says to Israel:

¹⁴ `You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but shall fear your God: I *am* the LORD. (Lev. 19:14)

No, they can't hear you, and they can't see you, but I can, says God. And you should be aware of my presence. He says to servants ⁵ Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; ⁶ not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, (Eph. 6:5-7)

Your master might not see you cheat, be lazy, steal some money, slander someone else, but God does. The fear of the Lord is rightly recognising that I live in the presence of this good and great God.

That is why the one thief on the cross shouted at the other, “Don't you fear God, seeing we are in the same condemnation?” In other words, here you are on the cross, throwing insults around as if you're innocent and Jesus is guilty! You're acting like God isn't here, watching and judging.”

A. W. Tozer said, “The Presence and the manifestation of the Presence are not the same. There can

be the one without the other. God is here when we are wholly unaware of it. He is manifest only when and as we are aware of His Presence. On our part there must be surrender to the Spirit of God, for His work it is to show us the Father and the Son. If we co-operate with Him in loving obedience God will manifest Himself to us, and that manifestation will be the difference between a nominal Christian life and a life radiant with the light of His face.”

The fear of the Lord is more than a theoretical idea. It is when that knowledge of this good and great God comes to affect you all day. Proverbs 23:17 says ¹⁷ Do not let your heart envy sinners, But *be zealous* for the fear of the LORD all the day; (Prov. 23:17)

All the day. Living in the conscious knowledge of this good and great God that you are in relationship with. Knowing He is there: at work, in the car, in the kitchen, in the TV room, at your desk, as you sit with your phone, as you sit behind the laptop. When that affects your words, thoughts, and deeds as much or more than if a parent, pastor, policemen walked up, then you are in the fear of the Lord.

Now, as we'll see, the fear of the Lord is both a downward movement of grace from God to man, and then an upward movement of faith from man to God. God works in us, and we work out what He has worked in. For today, we need to ask, do we know the true God? Do you know what it is to rejoice with trembling, to worship with reverence and awe?

You will know that if you have heard and embraced the biblical Gospel, that God the Son died to save sinners on the cross. And then, Christian, how conscious are you of the presence of God through the day? Are you living to avoid His frown and experience His smile in all of life?