

The Fear of the Lord

"The fear of the Lord is pure" (Psalm 19:9).

"Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you" (Psalm 90:11).

"The Lord will judge His people." 'It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God'" (Heb 10:30-31).

"Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Corinthians 5:11).

"Live your lives as strangers here in fear" (1 Peter 1:17).

The climactic deliverance in the Bible is, of course, that wrought by Messiah Jesus. Other great deliverances include those of Noah and his family and the nation of Israel from Egypt. Others of perhaps lesser significance are narrated, such as those during the period of the Judges and the one in Esther. But vastly more numerous in the Bible are the judgments. If I were to list them all, it'd be a very long list; it'd be, essentially, a review of the story of the whole Bible. The opening pages tell of terrible judgments and the Bible closes with terrible judgments, and judgments occur everywhere in between. Why is this?

A lesson that emerges from reading almost anywhere in the Bible is that God is deadly serious about our response to Him. He has in grace revealed Himself and His works and His will, and He has constituted us with the faculties needed to respond to Him as He expects. So He holds us accountable for our response. And responses that displease or offend Him result in judgment. This is one of the most fundamental axioms of all Scripture. God is not indifferent to us. We all live before His face. He misses nothing. And He will judge us on how we live, on our attitude toward Him and His will.

As our great High Priest in the very presence of God, Jesus continually intercedes for us. But He also judges and disciplines. Think of Ananias and Sapphira for example. That episode was to instill fear in the church. Almost every parable Jesus told in the synoptic Gospels served as a warning. Paul warned the Corinthian believers that the Lord, having already disciplined some of them, may do it further. The author of Hebrews warned his readers repeatedly and not subtly. Jesus Himself directly warned the seven churches in Revelation. All the Bible exists as a warning: "Be careful how you respond to God!"

Always, God takes the initiative to redeem us. In love, He gives us a written revelation. He gives us a Savior. He justifies us, sanctifies us, adopts us, blesses us, and takes us to Himself. He gifts us with His Holy Spirit. He makes precious promises that He's committed to keep. God is good. Nevertheless, we're given this warning: **"Therefore . . . let us obtain grace, by which we serve [or worship] God in a way that's acceptable to Him, with reverence and fear, for our God is a consuming fire"** (Hebrews 12:28-29). By the grace of God, we are able to respond to Him with loving obedience and service; and we do that with an attitude of reverence appropriate for who He is, filled with fear of offending Him. We dare not be indifferent to God's revealed will as Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, were. They offered in the tabernacle what was offensive to God and were instantly struck dead. We're not free to live as we please, but according to God's instructions in His Word.

Almost every Bible teacher, expositor and commentary claims that the word commonly translated "fear" really only means awe or reverence. "We keep an attitude of reverence because of God's majesty." Nonsense. The word means to be frightened, to be scared, to be filled with terror.* A despotic ruler (a Nero or a Stalin, for example) should be feared because he is unjust, evil and foolish. We fear God however precisely because He is just, good and wise—but *we are not*. Before the Fall, before he had a sin nature, Adam was expected to fear God ("When you eat of it, you will surely die!"). Wanting to avoid the dreadful consequence God warned him of, taking Him at His word and thus obeying Him, Adam would have honored God greatly. Tragically, he didn't fear God as he should. Afterward, under the condemnation of death, Adam realized he really should

have feared God. God is to be honored by His human creatures, and to fear Him is to honor Him. Fearing God, we acknowledge His holiness and His just rule over all creation. To contemplate God's immensely powerful Person is (or should be) frightening.

We obey God either because we love Him or we fear Him. Both are legitimate and proper motives. We can even say this: To fear God is to worship Him. **"Fear God and give Him glory . . . worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea"** (Revelation 14:7; also 19:5).

Now let's look at some highly relevant Scripture.

Noah did what he did out of the fear of God (Hebrews 11:7). So did Abraham (Genesis 22:12). **"The midwives feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do"** (Exodus 1:17,21). Even before experiencing the Exodus, these Israelites knew who God was and feared Him more than fearing Pharaoh—who it was lethal to disobey. In the O.T., a dozen or so others are said to have done something extraordinarily risky out of fear of God. It is creaturely humility to fear the holy, sovereign, creator God and so to obey Him.

At Sinai, when the Israelites saw God descending, they trembled with fear. And Moses explained, **"God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning"** (Exodus 20:18-20). God desires that we fear Him not because He needs it, but for our good. Later, God told Moses, **"I will do miracles never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see the works of the Lord, for it is a fearful thing that I am going to do for you"** (Exodus 34:10). God expects us to know who He is, a God who controls all nature, unlike anything humans can even imagine, and so to fear Him.

"And now O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees . . ." (Deuteronomy 10:12-13). Israel was not given liberty to pursue life according to their own lights but according to God's revealed will for His purposes. The fear of God was compelling because as their God He had the authority to discipline them—and that with fierce indignation. (See Deuteronomy 28!) The choice of blessings or curses was always before them, depending on whether they obeyed God, or not. Joshua later repeated this exhortation, **"Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness"** (24:14). Refusing to serve God as He commanded so as to serve other gods would indicate the absence of the fear of God, and so deserve harsh discipline. The exhortation to fear God runs as a sub-theme all thru Deuteronomy; it's the controlling reason for God's people to obey Him.

Psalms 2 is central to understanding all Scripture. **"Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him"** (vv. 10-12). The fear of the Lord should propel us to Him for safety from His wrath. Revelation narrates when those who feared and responded appropriately to Psalm 2 are vindicated (11:18, for example, and 14:7 and 19:5).

"Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who finds great delight in his commands" (Psalm 112:1b). Huh? Who today delights in obeying God's commands? Who today even wants to know them? Who today fears God? No wonder the Lord's blessings aren't being experienced.

Sending out His disciples to spread the good news that the Kingdom was imminent, Jesus warned them, **"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell"** (Matthew 10:28). Jesus was essentially warning His followers (that includes us today) that we're to obey Him doing mission regardless of how deadly dangerous it is because God is even more dangerous if we, Jesus' followers, are disobedient. God judges us! And punishment for disobedience is here being threatened.

"Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you either. Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off" (Romans 11:22-23). God will judge His people, whether Israel or those in the Church! Note the "if" clause, "if you continue . . ." Readers who don't continue in God's kindness, which Paul must have considered a real possibility, certainly do need to be fearful. Paul writes a similar warning, though it's not as forceful, in 1 Corinthians, **"Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall"** (10:12).

When Paul went to Corinth to deal with them, he did it **“with fear and much trembling”** (2:3), not because he feared the Corinthian believers but because what he had to do was serious, and it had to be done right, as the Lord was watching. Paul understood that responsibilities bring with it fear of failure. Do we get that? Paul wrote to the Galatian believers, **“I fear for you”** (4:11) because he knew that God obliges us—*requires us!*—to understand the implications of the Gospel and (evidently, from this phrase here and again in Ephesians 6:5) holds us accountable for living out all that the Gospel implies.

In Acts 19, we read about God working extraordinary miracles in public thru Paul, and there was an incident involving an evil spirit empowering a certain person to be uncontrollably violent. As a result, **“fear fell upon them all, both Jews and Gentiles who lived in Ephesus”** (v. 17). To be acutely aware of God’s work, to directly experience His acts, is scary! The glory of His presence transcends what creatures are able even to imagine.

Paul repeatedly exhorts us to fear God. We’re to pursue sanctification in the fear of God (2 Corinthians 7:1). We’re all to be lovingly submissive to one another in the fear of God (Ephesians 5:21). We’re to **“work out [our] salvation in fear and trembling”** (Philippians 2:12). We’re to be fearful of sinning (1 Timothy 5:20). Peter too understands the fear of God. He experienced it when Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead right in front of him. Thus he writes, **“If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay”** (1 Peter 1:17). Our entire Christian life is to be conducted in the awareness of future judgment (the Judgment Seat of Christ). It’s something we need to fear because once we die, all opportunity to be more Christ-like, to do more for Him, is gone. When we’re in glory, we’ll experience the reality of what the Spirit has put in the words of Scripture. Our fear should be that Christ will hold us accountable for all the responsibilities we don’t take seriously.

But someone now will say, “Hey, God loves us! And love cancels fear. Scripture says that, you know.” OK, let’s examine the text: **“God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love”** (1 John 4:16b-18). Mature, perfect love is God’s kind of transcendent love. It’s a humble, selfless, self-sacrificing love for those who are unlovely but who are needful. It’s a love that serves God and obeys God regardless the cost, regardless the consequences, regardless the humiliation, or pain, or death—in other words, Jesus’ kind of love. We’re to be like Jesus. *That* kind of godly love cancels fear of punishment; any other kind of love . . . Well, it’s not the response God expects, so discipline may result. An alternate understanding of v. 18 is, fear is itself a punishment, indicating that person has not matured in love. Both interpretations mean this: Judgment of believers is a reality. If we’re concerned about God’s discipline, about God punishing us, it’s because we’re not Christ-like, as we should be.

Dear Reader: We’re saved because of fear. Fear of God’s wrath, after all, is the fundamental reason we believe the Gospel. And once saved, fear should motivate us to godly character and godly living. The fear of God works powerfully in everyone who knows God. That’s because of God’s overwhelming glory, because of God’s justice and His loving discipline of those who are His so that they are perfect. God is good, but also dangerous; good to those who respond to Him as He has revealed He expects, but dangerous to all others (John 3:36).

* In some places in the Hebrew Scriptures, the word usually translated “fear” must mean reverence for God rather than dread. For example, Isaiah prophesies that the future Messiah would “fear” God (11:2d). Also in Acts, Luke thrice uses the phrase, “the fear of the Lord,” as a shorthand expression with the approximate meaning of living according to Christ’s teachings (2:43, 5:5, and 9:31).