

JUST WHAT DO YOU MEAN “THE FEAR OF GOD”?

What do you think of when you think of the term the fear of God or fear of the Lord when you read it in the Bible? Are we supposed to be afraid of God even though we are told in the Bible to love Him with all of our might? Is the Bible contradicting itself? Is the word fear just poorly translated where it should be translated honour, awe or reverence? Just how are we to understand this term the fear of God or the fear of the Lord? In the sermonette today I would like to help clarify just what the Bible means when we are told to fear God.

The fear of God is a multi-faceted term that when properly understood in its full richness will help deepen our relationship with God. A logical place to start in explaining what the fear of God is to define the words that are translated into fear from the Hebrew and Greek and answer the question whether fear is a mistranslation for these words or not. The Hebrew words used for fear in connection with fearing God are yirah, yare and pachad and these words all mean “fear,” “terror,” or “dread.” One internet article entitled “Fear of God” says in relation to the Hebrew words used:

“Although many Christian teachers will downplay the ‘fear of God’ and use replacement words such as ‘respect,’ ‘reverence,’ or ‘honor,’ the Hebrew language is pretty clear. In addition, there are other Hebrew words that portray softer meanings, such as kabad (Exodus 20:12 – ‘Honor your father and your mother...’ Proverbs 3:9 – ‘Honor the LORD with your wealth...’).”

One scripture that illustrates the fear of God as meaning terror or dread is Jeremiah 5:22 which says: “Should you not fear me?” declares the Lord. ‘Should you not tremble in my presence?’”

The story is much the same with the Greek. The Greek translated fear in reference to fearing God is phobos. Phobos is easily recognised as the root of the word phobia used for the fear of anything in particular.

The first aspect of the fear of God that usually comes to mind to most people is the fear of God’s judgment or punishment for our sins. In Hebrews 12 in talking about the discipline of God Paul encourages us to not see this as a negative but as a positive sign that God loves us and wants to bring us back on the right path even if that includes the pain of discipline at times.

God is like most caring human fathers who love their children who will, at times, discipline their children as a deterrent to bad behaviour that they know will hurt a child if they continue doing such things. Proverbs 14:27 puts it very well when it says: “The fear of the LORD *is* a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death.” It’s a fountain of life – a positive thing to be spared from the dangers to one’s life. Knowing the potential pain of God’s discipline should deter us from straying from His way of life.

How do we reconcile the seemingly opposing ideas of loving God and fearing Him? To reconcile these seemingly contradictory ideas we need to recognise **that there is a right and a wrong kind of fear – a healthy fear and unhealthy fear. Fear is an emotion but it’s the choices we act on that determine if it is the right or wrong kind of fear.**

When it comes to physical pursuits there is a healthy and unhealthy fear. There is a healthy fear of activities that might cause us danger and that healthy fear motivates us to avoid danger. The wrong kind of fear takes this fear to an extreme where we can become paralysed with fear in an unhealthy way such as some illogical phobias that can paralyse a person.

This also applies on the spiritual level with our relationship with God. Let’s take a look at one example of the wrong kind of fear towards God over in Exodus 20:19. It is the response of the Israelites to Moses to not have God talk to them directly at Mount Sinai after He gave them the Ten Commandments where they allowed their fear to push out any sort of trust in God’s love and

concern for them. Starting in verse 19 we read: “And they said to Moses, You speak with us, and we will hear. But let not God speak with us, lest we die. And Moses said to the people, Do not fear, for God has come to test you, and so that His fear may be before your faces, so that you may not sin. And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.”

David Hocking in a commentary on this passage writes:

“You know that is almost a paradox. He tells the people not to be afraid. And then tells them that they would fear God. So we learn that fearing God is not simply being scared. And they were scared at this point because they saw a visible demonstration of God-fire, all of this. They were scared, really scared, frightened by what God did. And He said, ‘Hey, don't be scared. Don't be scared at all. I have come to test you. I want My fear to be before you, so that you may not sin.’ He had just revealed the consequences that could happen to somebody who disobeyed the Ten Commandments, which are found in Exodus 20. You see, the fear of God is staying away from sin.”

Another example is the fear of the unprofitable servant who hid his talent out of fear of his master. He made a poor choice in allowing his fear to paralyse him into inaction. He had the wrong kind of fear that didn't produce positive results.

The right kind of fear motivates us to hate sin and the dangers of sin and God's punishment for it. When we properly understand that God is not abusive with His power like men can be, we can completely trust Him and when, on occasion, He does discipline us, we know He always does so in love. A healthy fear of God includes the fear of the consequences of disobedience. There may be times of temptation or trial when we may forget some of the better reasons for obeying God, and that is when we had better think of the consequences.

John Piper in his book “The Pleasures of God” describes the fear of God as if we were caught in a terrible storm while exploring an Arctic glacier. The storm is so strong that you fear you'll blow right over the side of the cliff but then you discover a cleft in the ice where you can hide and find shelter. Even though you are safe, you watch the storm go past with a kind of trembling pleasure. He writes:

“At first there was the fear that this terrible storm and awesome terrain might claim your life. But then you found a refuge and gained the hope that you would be safe. But not everything in the feeling called fear vanished from your heart. Only the life-threatening part. There remained the trembling, the awe, the wonder, the feeling that you would never want to tangle with such a storm or be the adversary of such power...The fear of God is what is left of the storm when you have a safe place to watch right in the middle of it...Oh, the thrill of being here in the center of the awful power of God, yet protected by God himself!”

This illustrates the deep respect we should have for the power of God's Word in Isaiah 66:2 by those who have been afflicted by life and have a contrite heart as they find refuge in God. Proverbs 14:26 describes the fear of the Lord as a strong confidence and as a place of refuge. We cling to God because we know how destructive sin and going it our own way is.

Let's look at another passage which speaks about both love and the fear of God over in 1 John 4:17. We read: “In this is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment, that as He is, so also we are in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, because fear has torment.” The context of the fear spoken of here in us having confidence or boldness in the day of judgment.

Knowing His overwhelming love for us and the mercy and forgiveness available through Jesus' sacrifice casts out the fear of God's condemnation when, in an overall sense, we are abiding in His way. Romans 8:15 talks about not having received “the spirit of bondage again to fear” but the spirit of sonship where we can draw near to our good and perfect Heavenly Father.

Knowing the depths of God's love and the forgiveness He makes available through Jesus' sacrifice it gives us the joy and freedom to love Him wholeheartedly and live boldly not fearing what others can do to us.

Oswald Chambers once made this profound statement about the fear of God. He wrote: "The remarkable thing about fearing God is that, when you fear God, you fear nothing else; whereas, if you do not fear God, you fear everything else."

When we fear God we are far more focused on what God thinks than what other people think. We are not living for the approval of others but to please and honour God. We obey God rather than man when the two are not the one and the same.

A second aspect of the fear of God that we have already touched on is having a deep awe and reverence of God. This is an overwhelming sense of God's power and size and majesty that helps produce a deep respect and reverence and ties in with the use of the word trembling in many verses.

Imagine before you stands a giant over 100 feet tall and he is looking directly at you. If you don't know the giant's intention towards you no doubt you will be terrified. Even if you know the giant's intentions are benign you are still going to tread carefully. When we fully appreciate God's power and majesty as well as His justice in regards to His law we can't help but be in great awe and fear Him. Psalm 33:8 says "Let all the earth fear the LORD: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him."

A deep awe and reverence of God helps us to take Him and His beneficial laws very seriously. It motivates us to put Him first in our lives rather than give Him the leftovers in regards to our time, our money and our priorities. Everything God says in His Word takes priority and precedent over one's personal will and desires. God's way becomes the only way. By the same token, when a life is lived outside the fear of God, the things of God will be secondary. Other matters will consistently be placed ahead of God and His will and His work.

There is also a third and often overlooked aspect of the right kind of fear of God. When we deeply love someone we have a positive fear not to disappoint or displease them and to honour them with our actions.

I mentioned before that the Greek word for fear is phobos. Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words that phobos is not just "a mere 'fear' of His power and righteous retribution, but **a wholesome dread of displeasing Him**". This is the right type of positive, productive fear. The well-known 19th century preacher Charles Spurgeon made the following comments about this. He said:

"Have you heard of the boy whose father was exceedingly fond of him? He was asked by some other boys to go and rob an orchard with them but he said, 'No, I will not go.' They replied, 'Your father won't scold you, nor beat you. You may safely come.' To this he answered, 'What? Do you think because my father loves me, that therefore I will grieve him? No, I love him and I love to do what he wishes me to do. Because he loves me I fear to vex him.' That is like the child of God. The more he knows of God's love, the more he trembles at the thought of offending the Most High."

This is confirmed in the definition of the fear of God in Proverbs 8:13 where we read "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil." When we hate evil we are obviously not doing evil and therefore don't fear His punishment at that moment in time. We are fearing to disappoint Him by hating that which offends God.

A classic example of this is Joseph when Potiphar's wife was trying to seduce him. The path of least resistance would have been to secretly have sex with her yet Joseph told her in Genesis 39:9:

'There is none greater in this house than I. Neither has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?'

He didn't say how can I do this wickedness against my master but to this woman who did not care about his God he said "How can I do this against my God." Fear to disappoint God and not wanting to offend God was front and centre in his mind.

In the Questions and Answers section on our UCG website in talking about the fear of God it states:

"When we first start obeying God, it could be out of fear of the alternative — death. But the more we keep God's law, the more we come to understand God's love for us. We begin to see that God's laws were not just an arbitrary set of high-stakes rules He set in place just because He could. We discover that He gave us His good laws because He knows that following them will give us the best life possible...God does not want us to be in continual terror of Him, though that may be where we start in our relationship with Him. Proper, mature fear of God means having a healthy reverence and respect for the most powerful Being in the universe and the laws He has set in place for our own benefit."

Rather than a paralyzing terror, the positive fear of the Lord taught in the Bible is a key element in change. It helps us have a proper, humble perspective of ourselves in relation to our awesome God; it helps us in times of temptation when we need to remember the serious consequences of disobeying God; and it motivates us to become more like our loving Creator.

In conclusion, the right kind of fear of God includes a healthy not unhealthy fear of God's judgment on our sins to avoid the dangers of sin. It includes a deep awe and reverence of Him as well as being a positive fear not to disappoint or displease Him.

We should all want a fear that trusts him in the midst of storms, that stands in awe of His amazing grace. We should want a fear that lets go of needing to control everything in our grasp and trusts Him to provide everything we need. We should want a right fear, the kind that chases away all other fears including the fear of men. Today I hope that I have given you some better clarity of what the fear of God is and I hope that clarity can make a positive difference in your own relationship with God.