

The Fear of the Lord

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He set himself to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God; and as long as he sought the lord God made him prosper. (2 Chr. 26:5)

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The Fear of the Lord

Introduction

There is nothing in all of creation more powerful for the human than obedience. Nothing affects man's existence, regardless of his religiosity more than this quality. It governs intellect, emotions, and physical ability. Obedience to authority is important regardless of one's religious beliefs--or lack of them.

The major reward for obedience to authority is longevity. Well over one hundred passages in the Old and New Testament emphasize this one concept. Life and obedience go hand in hand.

However, looking at obedience and what it promises and the promises associated with fearing God, one is immediately struck by a huge difference in benefits between the two.

While obedience promises longevity and to a lesser degree a measure of peace, fear of the Lord promises thirty or more specific benefits. Among them are wisdom, knowledge, insight, prolonged life, prosperity, abundance, the desire of one's heart, food, confidence, healing and the list goes on. The purpose of this essay is to examine this quality of fearing the Lord in order to discern its gifts, learn how it's acquired, how it's taught.

Acquisition of the fear of the Lord might be compared with putting on a heavy coat in mid-winter or an armored vest worn by a police officer. Fear of the Lord is a protective coat that protects us from evil and dangerous temptations.

The Scriptures tell us that understanding the fear of the Lord and how it is acquired is one of the most profitable endeavors that man can undertake. Unfortunately, there are some difficult barriers to reaching this goal.

The chief barrier is man himself. When I was a child, my mother raised me believing and trusting in fear of Him. She would point out the ridiculous notion of popular preachers of the time, that one need only 'respect' God, or perhaps revere but never fear. This notion persists today.

After forty years of studying God's Word, I can confidently say there is no biblical basis for such nonsense. God expects us to fear Him. This is evident in the words used in Scripture to denote the concept of fearing God.

It is unfortunate that linguistically the concepts of reverence and respect in our time are somewhat diluted and do not actually represent the power and majesty originally invested in them.

If reverence and respect are used in the sense that recognizes the tremendous power of God, then they most certainly become good synonyms for the Greek and Hebrew words that describe the experience that one is to have before God Almighty.

Perhaps the following experience from the life of Isaiah gives us a more accurate view of reverence." In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!'"

Oh yes. I strongly suspect that this experience defines reverence rather nicely, particularly when the earthquake occurred. Any idea what it would be like to experience force ten earthquakes? I do imagine the experience would put the fear of God in you. It most certainly has others.

But we do not like thinking of God as one to be feared. We wish to use words like love, kindness, and gentleness to describe what we feel, and who He is. If we see reverence as a bit of patriotism as when one salutes the flag at the playing of the national anthem, then we miss the point.

I doubt that anyone near Mount St. Helens, when it exploded with a force of 27,000 atom bombs, felt anything but pure terror. One can hardly sit in a cellar while an F-5 sweeps away everything in its path without shuttering -- so it is with the reverence or fear before God. No matter how righteous one may be. Even Moses and Daniel quaked with fear before the living God.

I. Language Issues

What is the background of the words the biblical writers used to describe this experience before God?

The original words carry the idea of flight, terror, terror-stricken, to terrify, dread, to tremble, to quake. In a secondary sense they may be used as "revere", "awe", or "honor" (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Vol. 9 189-220). The chief words in both Hebrew and Greek (Yare and Phobia) are translated fear.

In looking at the original language, the Greek most often uses the word phobia from which we get our word phobia. (Strongs G5399). The Hebrew verb, adjective and noun forms of this word (Strongs Hebrew H3372) are used four hundred and twenty times in the Old Testament. They are used in a variety of settings referring to the Lord and as well as the emotional and intellectual experience of mankind in general.

The Greek form (G5399) is most often used to translate from the Hebrew into the Greek of the Septuagint (Greek version of the Old Testament) as well as being used in the New Testament when speaking of fear.

However, our understanding is not so much enlarged by knowledge about the words but by observing how the concept is used in God's word.

II. Passages on Obedience and Benefits

As alluded to earlier, obedience is one of the most powerful forces in our lives. Here is a sampling of the passages on obedience and the promises they hold.

(Exo 20:12 RSV) "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long"

(Deut 5:33 RSV) "You shall walk in all the way which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land which you shall possess."

(Deut 8:1 RSV) "All the commandment which I command you this day you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply,"

(Deut 30:16 RSV) "If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you"

(Prov 1:19 RSV) "Such are the ways of all who get gain by violence; it takes away the life of its possessors."

(Prov 3:2 RSV) "for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare will they give you."

(Prov 4:10 RSV) "Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many."

(Prov 4:22 RSV) " For they are life to him who finds them, and healing to all his flesh."

(Prov 9:11 RSV) "For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life."

(Eph 6:3 RSV) "that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth."

These are just a few of a large number of verses on the subject of obedience. But they represent a majority of the promises that go with obedience; that is days or years added to one's life. Yet when one contrast the benefits of obedience with the benefits of fearing God, one is struck with the huge difference between the two.

III. Passages on the Benefits of Fearing the Lord

(Deut 6:2 RSV) "that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life; and that your days may be prolonged."

(Job 28:28) "And he said to man, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.'"

(Deut 5:29) "Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and With their children for ever!"

(2 Chr 26:5) "He set himself to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God; and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper."

(Psa 25:14) "The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him."

(Psa 31:19) "O how abundant is thy goodness, which thou hast laid up for those who fear thee,"

(Psa 33:18) "Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,"

(Psa 34:7) "The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him,"

(Psa 34:9) "O fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him have no want!"

(Psa 61:5) "For thou, O God, hast heard my vows, thou hast given me the heritage of those who fear thy name."

(Psa 103:11) "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;"

(Psa 103:13) "As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear him."

(Psa 103:17) "But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children,"

(Psa 111:5) "He provides food for those who fear him;"

(Psa 115:11) "You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD! He is their help and their shield."

(Psa 145:19) "He fulfils the desire of all who fear him,"

(Psa 147:11) "but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,"

(Prov 1:7) "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;"

(Prov 8:13) "The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil."

(Prov 9:10) "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,"

(Prov 10:27) "The fear of the LORD prolongs life."

(Prov 14:26) "In the fear of the LORD one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge."

(Prov 14:27) "The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, that one may avoid the snares of death."

(Prov 15:33) “The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom, and humility goes before honor.”

(Prov 16:6) “by the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil.”

(Prov 22:4) “The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life.”

(Isa 33:6) “the fear of the LORD is his treasure.”

(Mal 4:2) “But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.”

(2 Cor 5:11) “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men.”

(2 Cor 7:1) “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God.”

The Scriptures promise over thirty benefits from fearing the Lord. It is indeed a great treasure. Just one of those benefits was 'friendship' with God. Ever wonder about the benefit of being God's friend?

Actually it's a very interesting notion. The first time we come across it is in Genesis 18. Here the Lord invites Abraham to intervene in behalf of Sodom, which He is about to destroy. The Scripture addresses in a very intimate manner the importance the Lord places on disclosure of such an event. I do not know for sure but it would seem that friendship with the Lord may well bring forewarnings of great danger. This friendship between Abraham and God was so important that it is referred to three times in scripture. (2 Chronicles 20:7, Isa. 41:5, James 2:23). Three thousand years after Abraham's death the Lord, through the New Testament writer James refers to their friendship.

I believe that there are five steps, that as they are practiced, increase one's fear of the Lord

IV. Teaching the Fear of the Lord

So how does one learn how to fear God? Fear of the Lord is grounded in laws, ordinances, and statutes. Fundamentally, fear of God is rooted in authority. This is significant when we see how difficult it is for some to fear God. They might love, adore, believe, trust, but somehow they find it difficult to fear. That is because we tend to be a rebellious people. Rebellion is against authority, and fear of God is fear of authority. Authority is established by God

A notable exception from this list (laws, ordinances, and statutes) may be observed. Usually when Scripture addresses passages with key terms like law, statutes and ordinances one would expect to find the concept of testimony.

However, Scripture does not link testimony with obtaining fear of the Lord. This is somewhat surprising when one realizes what testimonies are and the part they play

in scripture. What are testimonies? They are those passages throughout God's word which speak to us about what He has done.

Testimonies date from the Creation. They include stories of battles fought by the Lord our behalf to fighting battles. Battles where three hundred are used to defeat thirty thousand (Abraham and Gideon) or drowning the army of the Egyptians who are chasing the Israelites. Testimonies include stories of the feeding of the five thousand, raising the dead, healing the sick. Testimonies generate faith, hope and love, but not fear of God. Fear of God is rooted in ones attitude towards authority. Stories reveal His awesome power, but authority lays the groundwork for fear.

When we retell our stories, our experiences with the Lord, they reinforce our trust and belief. But the actual experience is based on our obedience, or maybe our disobedience and how the Lord gets our attention.

V. How One Learns to Fear the Lord

Fear of the holy one is not something that is acquired accidentally, or inborn in the nature of a person. Teaching is a must. After the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. the inhabitants of the land started experiencing severe difficulties. They were advised to have someone come and teach them the laws of the land. "So one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and dwelt in Bethel, and taught them how they should fear the LORD" (II Kings 17:28).

This passage spells out the necessity of teaching one to fear the Lord. The context of the passages emphasizes the continual danger the people were in because they were strangers in the land and knew not what God required. Therefore, they are told how to resolve the issue. Call for someone who can teach what the Lord requires is what they were told.

Deut. 6:1-4 teaches that hearing is a must and should be exercised daily, minutely, in all walks of life for young and old alike. Deut 31:13 "and so that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD."

The first step in learning to fear the Lord therefore is learned by listening to the will of the Lord, His commands, judgments, precepts, ordinances, and laws.

The second means of acquiring fear of God is suggested in Deut. 17:19 "and it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them." The Jews went to great lengths to do this. The basic commands were written on their doorposts and in tassels on the hem of their garments. They took seriously this idea of the continuous reading of God's laws.

The third step is recounted in Zephaniah 3:2,7. "She listens to no voice, she accepts no correction.... She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God. I said, 'Surely she will fear me, she will accept correction; she will not lose sight of all that I have enjoined upon her.' But all the more they were eager to make all their deeds corrupt."

Indeed correction is the main manner in which fear is communicated. Fear of authority forms the basis for a godly nation, and obedient family. If correction is just and consistent, then the person learns to fear the authority and also to cling to it. This sets the groundwork for a later relationship with the Lord.

Parents who raise their children as friends, companions, and equals do their children a great disservice. A child does not learn correction by logic. Reasoning with a child about why certain conduct is unacceptable rarely works. A child will "why" you to death with no intent to obey. Furthermore, later relationships with authority figures will be impaired. Well did Solomon say, "By mere words a person is not disciplined, for though he understands, he will not give heed" (Proverbs 29:19).

The fourth step is found in Deut. 14:23. "And before the LORD your God, in the place which he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstlings of your herd and flock; that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always." Now why will tithing cause one to fear God? What is the basic principle upon which tithing is grounded .

As one studies the Holy Bible, it becomes apparent from first to last that proper sacrifices are crucial to the Lord. One reveals the motives of the giver. The crucial element in fearing God is sacrifice.

The fifth way a person learns fear of the Lord is spoken of in Deut. 17:18-19. "And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law." In this amazing passage a person is told that one learns to fear the Lord by writing scripture! If it was good enough for a king, then it most certainly would work for someone of lesser degree.

Indeed for several years now I have emphasized to my counseling clients the importance of writing Scripture, both for themselves and as a form of discipline to be used with their children. Usually the suggestion in the beginning is not accepted. All sorts of complaints are thrown out such as "that will cause a child to hate Scripture." Other counselors have said that it was "stupid" and a waste of time, a sure way of making the child hate scripture. However, when it has been tried, the results are astounding.

One client told speaking of her nine year old who had been a real discipline problem. She related that three weeks after she had started using this tactic the discipline problem went away. She also related that she was standing at the back door one morning, and as the child was playing with other children, he began correcting them by quoting passages out of the book of Proverbs. Any reservations about the assignment ceased.

Another client used writing Scripture with her twelve year old who hated writing Proverbs. He thought it unjust and unfair. Six years later she received a call from this son who had just began college. He reminded her that she had made him write scriptures and praised her for it.

He told her that he was now living in a dorm with other students who had no idea of what was right or wrong; and he had remembered the numerous passages out of Proverbs written and the lessons discovered. They became to him an excellent guide for those who sought his advice. Other secondary advantages as testified to by clients

are improved writing skills, a model for excellent grammar usage, and increasing one's memory.

These five methods of teaching fear of God; hearing, reading, correcting, tithing, and writing seem to be the preferred method for acquiring fear.

VI. Special Considerations

Acquisition of the fear of the Lord is essential to our warfare against the authority and power of Satan. The fear of the Lord defends against destruction by the enemy. It protects the heart by humility and the spirit by meekness.

Studying the fear of the Lord is in itself protective and beneficial. One of the assignments I use with clients who suffer from panic attacks is founded in studying the fear of the Lord. Here is how that assignment is given.

Any time we fear anything, some of the physiological experiences attending the fear may be shortness of breath, dizziness, faintness, smothering sensation, palpitations, trembling, shaking, sweating, choking, nausea, numbness, discomfort in the chest and other similar symptoms. These symptoms are experienced in varying degrees of intensity, depending on the object which we fear. Some times only one symptom may be present, at other times several.

Now the unique thing about these symptoms is that as one begins to read, write, or study the passages on the fear of the Lord, the symptoms begin to abate.

Another way of expressing this is that if we fear anything other than God, we experience a physical discomfort. Fear of the Lord brings a sense of peace and well-being even in the midst of chaos. Let me share an experience from my personal life.

I will give some background and then relate the details as they occurred in order to convey the feelings of the moment. Keep in mind that the apprehension and fear, the anticipation of the unknown can be paralyzing. Yet even in the intense situation about to be recounted, reminding myself of the passages on the fear of the Lord and remembering that if I feared Him, nothing else could supplant and take control of my thoughts. This brought a sense of calmness.

I am a Reserve officer with the Dallas Police Department. Reserve Officers work patrol alongside regular officers performing the same task and with the same authority. They are sworn Peace Officers just as regular officers are, only they work less hours. I worked the first fifteen years as a patrol officer in the area of South Dallas which is known for its exceedingly high crime. The following event occurred during the third year of service in the early 1980's.

It was mid-July and very hot. My partner and I were preparing to leave the station at four in the afternoon. We had just let the dispatcher know we were available for a call. She responded, " 341, you have a signal 6 at 1852 Valentine. (341 is our element number. Signal 6 is a disturbance call.) "Received, I said."

"Well, Tony, it looks like it's going to be a long evening, and we have not even eaten Mexican food yet." The reference to eating Mexican food came because every time we

ate Mexican food, it seemed we got involved in a high speed chase, shooting, riot, murder, or other major incident. The conversation was interrupted by the dispatcher again stating, "341, we are getting numerous calls from that location." "Received dispatch we are en route."

Silence filled the vehicle as we both begin to feature in our minds the location. Ten seconds later, the emergency signal was emitted, and the dispatcher said, "341 your call is now a shooting. You are authorized code three." Tenseness in the dispatcher's voice reflected our own feelings of the moment as red lights and siren pierced the hot afternoon.

A few moments later, again the emergency signal was emitted and again a very tense dispatcher spoke, "342, 345, 313, 311, cover 341 on a shooting at 1852 Valentine. Shots are being fired and the suspects are using automatic weapons. There are numerous victims approach the location with caution."

In the distance we could hear the gunfire even over our siren as we approached the location. "341 we are a block from the location. Inform the other elements shots are still being fired."

Having been studying the fear of the Lord, I had memorized some passages to repeat to myself in times of stress. Passages like; "The Angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him," "You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord! He is their help and shield." "The fear of man lays a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord is safe."

Even in the midst of the chaos, a sense of calmness overwhelmed me as I reviewed these passages. It is amazing how a physical sense of peace and well-being flows through you and calms the agitation and terror of the moment.

After this, I began to give assignments to my clients with anxiety problems and panic attacks, utilizing the biblical passages on the fear of the Lord. I was amazed at the number of people who reported similar feelings of calmness overwhelming them in situations normally creating anxiety.

Now we need to make a distinction here between fear and being afraid. Fear is rooted in reality. If a tiger escapes the local zoo, and you come face to face with it, you best have a sense of fear. However, to worry about what may happen or refuse to act because you are afraid of someone's disapproval is paramount to placing that person above God. This is not in one's best interest.

So one may ask, "What about the tiger? You do not to fear it?" "Yes, of course you do. However, if you had the tiger on your left and a huge brown bear coming at you on the right, which would you fear most?"

You see, we only have the capacity to fear one thing at a time. We might vacillate between multiple fears, but it is still one at a time. I am saying if that fear is of the Lord, first and foremost, then calmness is our reward. Calmness brings the enhanced ability to discern solutions even in the most chaotic situations.

Back to the lion and bear for a moment. We are not fearful that the animal will punish us, rather of its fierce power. This emphasizes an important distinction.

There are two sides to the fear of God. One side is born out of our immaturity and rebellion. This side motivates us to obedience out of fear of punishment by an Almighty God.

The other side, however, is an awareness of His Sovereignty and a desire above all else to serve such a good, loving, and powerful Being.

St. John, in the former circumstances says as mature love increases fear of punishment as a motivation decreases. As fear of punishment decreases and love of God increases, our fear of the Lord multiplies and a desire to be in His presence fills our spirits.

VII. Summary

Growing in the fear of the Lord takes effort on our part. Its rewards include longevity, peace, and protection as well as a host of other gifts. It is an attribute to be searched after and treasured more than silver and gold. Even in Heaven there is fear of the Lord. The closer one gets to heaven, the deeper the awareness of the overwhelming power of God Almighty.

About the Author

Dr. Jerry Stettheimer, Director of Christian Family Services, is a Clinical Member of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists and is certified by the Texas Board of Marriage and Family Therapists. He earned a Doctorate in Ministry in the field of Counseling from Harding Graduate School and a Ph.D. from Pacific Western University in Psychology.

He has been in private practice for fourteen years. Dr. Stettheimer has authored numerous articles and conducted seminars and workshops in the areas of addiction, incest, family violence, biblical character training, the motivational gifts and Christian women's issues. Prior to establishing CHRISTIAN FAMILY SERVICES MINISTRIES, he served thirteen years as the Coordinator of Aftercare Services for the Substance Abuse Unit at Terrell State Hospital. He has been married to Mary Stettheimer for over thirty-three years and is the father of two and grandfather of two.

It is Dr. Stettheimer's belief that God's Word provides the answers to life's problems and that difficult family problems provide an opportunity to acquire discipline and develop character. Regular participation in church and home devotionals is strongly encouraged in order to provide a firm foundation upon which character is built. It is through this process that enduring solutions are discovered and strong marriages created.

In addition to this booklet, Dr. Stettheimer has authored the following Character Building Booklets:

PUTTING ASIDE ANGER

A STUDY OF AUTHORITY, RESPECT, OBEDIENCE, AND CORRECTION

BLESSED ARE THEY THAT MOURN

ADDICTION: CAUSES AND CURES

CHRONICLING GOD'S BLESSINGS

SEX

ADULTERY: CAUSES, CURES, & CONSEQUENCES

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