

## What Does it Mean to 'Fear the Lord'?

In our journey through the book of Ecclesiastes we have come across the phrase or concept of the fear of God. Solomon's concluding statement to the pursuit of meaning in life which he puts at the end of Ecclesiastes is,

*Fear God and keep his commandments,  
for this is the whole duty of man.*

The Bible is full of commands to not be afraid of people or situations that cause us to fear and instead to trust God. Yet the Bible also tells us to fear God, like here, because this is what God wants from us. So, which one is it? That's the wrong question. There isn't just one aspect of what it means to fear God. The word 'fear' sounds negative but it's not always used in a negative way. Especially the fear of God. Listen to this prophetic passage about Jesus in Is. 11:1-3,

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.*

- <sup>2</sup> *The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—*  
<sup>3</sup> *and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.*

Is that negative or positive? Positive. Here's one we heard from Ecclesiastes 3,

<sup>11</sup> *He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.* <sup>12</sup> *I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live.* <sup>13</sup> *That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God.* <sup>14</sup> *I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.*

God does all these wonderful things for us so we will, *cover in abject humiliation before Him?* Doesn't sound like that here. Sounds very positive again. There is no one simple definition to the fear of the Lord. There are different facets of what it means based on context of the passage and our relationship with God. And this is how we want to proceed this morning. We'll talk about 3 main ways that we can understand the fear of the Lord and end with the most repeated way the fear of the Lord is referred to as a positive life-changing aspect to our relationship with God.

The most familiar way we think of the 'fear of the Lord' is in a negative sense. 'fear' is usually not a positive thing. We are afraid of many things. Fear cripples us. Fear can keep us safe, as in avoiding risks. But fear can also hinder us from discovering new things, experiences, even relationships. Fear can be both healthy and unhealthy. When we hear 'fear the Lord' or 'the fear of God' we think of

### **Fearing God's Judgment** **(Ps. 76)**

***Eternal condemnation because of failure to fear God***

In Ps. 76 we have a psalm about God's power over Egypt when He brought Israel out from slavery.

<sup>6</sup> At your rebuke, O God of Jacob, both horse and chariot lie still. <sup>7</sup> You alone are to be feared. Who can stand before you when you are angry? <sup>8</sup> From heaven you pronounced judgment, and the land feared and was quiet— <sup>9</sup> when you, O God, rose up to judge, to save all the afflicted of the land. *Selah*

<sup>10</sup> Surely your wrath against men brings you praise,  
and the survivors of your wrath are restrained.

<sup>11</sup> Make vows to the LORD your God and fulfill them; let all the neighboring lands bring gifts to the One to be feared. <sup>12</sup> He breaks the spirit of rulers; he is feared by the kings of the earth

God is holy, sinless and Creator and ruler of the world. He calls people to Him but many do not want Him. He will judge the world one day and separate His followers from His rejectors. The psalmist calls people to God and He is to be feared but if you turn to Him you are saved. His wrath falls on the unbelievers and doubters. Jesus told several parables about His future return and those who don't believe in Him will be thrown into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 25:30).

Job warned his 3 so-called friends who kept telling Job he had unconfessed sin in his life. And Job responded in

*29:19 you should fear the sword yourselves; for wrath will bring punishment by the sword, and then you will know that there is judgment.*

While God will deal with sin one day and remove those who reject Him from His presence, this in itself should draw us toward Him and not away from Him. Jonah refused to preach a gospel of repentance for sinners to the Ninevites because he said in Jonah 4:2

*"O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.*

The fear of God should lead to repentance but it often doesn't. However, even as believers there is the negative sense of God's punishment in that we don't want

### ***Temporal discipline because of displeasing God***

There are many examples of God's followers who experienced hardship directly as a result of sin. This was temporal discipline not eternal condemnation. *"There is no condemnation for those who ware in Christ Jesus"* (Rom. 8:1). If you have accepted Christ as your Saviour no one can take you out of the Father's hand including yourself. Nothing and no one can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:39). However, there are passages like Hebrews 12 which talk about the discipline hand of God, the warnings of Jesus that the way we judge others we will be judged (Matt. 7) and Peter's warnings that judgment begins in the house of God (1 Pet. 4). And we are reminded by Paul in 2 Cor. 5:10 that we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ *"that each one may receive what is due ... for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad"*. Paul is talking about our eternal rewards in glory for believers, not our salvation. We know about those verses and that is another way to learn the fear of God. But there are other ways also that even non-Christians acknowledge or are aware of and that we as believers enjoy.

- <sup>1</sup> *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*
- <sup>2</sup> *Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.*
- <sup>3</sup> *There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.*
- <sup>4</sup> *Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world*

## **Amazed by God's Handiwork** **(Psalm 19:1-6)**

The word 'fear' has the sense of awe, amazed, even overwhelmed. Sometimes people use the word revere or respect but it's a stiff unemotional word which seems to fall short when talking about God.

People ooh and ahh at sunsets, sunrises, earth's natural wonders like Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls and parks and animals. And now we can see images in deep space from the James Webb telescope and they are marvelously spectacular. And yet this information about God's handiwork which God says speaks silently 24/7/365 often falls on deaf ears.

### ***Unbelievers are informed by it but not convinced of God***

Romans 1:18-23 says

<sup>18</sup> *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, <sup>19</sup> since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. <sup>20</sup> For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.*

<sup>21</sup> *For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*

While people see the evidence of a Creator in the creation, many do not worship Him or even acknowledge His existence. Many, instead choose to worship it as if creation itself can look after itself – evolution. They don't want to believe in a God who is sovereign over the creation because that would imply He would be sovereign over us, also part of the creation. The late Christopher Hitchens a renowned atheist was once asked on Fox News if he believed in the existence of God. He said,

I think it would rather be awful if it were true. If there was a permanent, total round the clock supervision and invigilation of everything you did, you would never have a waking moment when you weren't being watched and controlled and supervised by some celestial entity from the moment of your conception to the moment of your death ... it would be like living in North Korea.

The knowledge is there but the conclusion is wrong. He had a wrong fear of God because he didn't have a relationship with God. It is only those of us who know God and understand Him look at His creation get it.

### ***Believers marvel at it and glorify God***

Listen to David's words in Ps. 29

- <sup>1</sup> *Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*  
<sup>2</sup> *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness.*  
<sup>3</sup> *The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters.*  
<sup>4</sup> *The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic.*  
<sup>5</sup> *The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon. ....*  
<sup>9</sup> *And in his temple all cry, "Glory!"*  
<sup>10</sup> *The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD is enthroned as King forever.*  
<sup>11</sup> *The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace.*

God is not uninvolved with His people. David saw the glory of God in the creation and worshipped. And, didn't see a harsh, over-bearing taskmaster but instead told others that this powerful God gives strength to His people and blesses them with peace. For David knowledge about God resulted in fearing God in all His wonder resulting in living his life for Him. This is where the 'fear of God' becomes very important. Let's come back to Solomon in Proverbs

- <sup>1:7</sup> *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.*  
<sup>9:10</sup> *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*

What does it mean for a believer to fear God? It means

## **To Be in Awe of God's Love and Kindness Towards Us** **(Prov. 2:1-5)**

Christopher Hitchens had knowledge but not wisdom. The information about God was in front of him. He understood that if there was a God He would be sovereign and in control of our lives. He saw that and rejected it because he never sought to know this God who loved him and created him and wanted to bless him with peace by a relationship.

Knowledge about who God is comes from His Word. To be in awe of and marvel at God requires a right understanding of who God is. To reject this knowledge is a foolish choice and it will not result in a better life. Listen to these Proverbs:

### ***His Words give life***

- <sup>2:1</sup> *My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, <sup>2</sup> turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, <sup>3</sup> and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, <sup>4</sup> and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, <sup>5</sup> then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. <sup>6</sup> For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.*  
<sup>7</sup> *He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,*  
<sup>8</sup> *for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones.*

<sup>14:26</sup> *He who fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge. <sup>27</sup>The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death.*

<sup>16:6</sup> *Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; through the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil.*

Why did God have a plan to forgive sins? So we would know God and have a better life, avoiding evil. When we have a right fear of God based on a relationship with Him knowing He loves us and offers to forgive our sins, that awe and marvel at Him

### **Results in a desire to obey Him**

Let's stay in Proverbs:

*3:7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.*

*8 This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.*

*8:13 To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.*

*14:2 Whoever fears the LORD walks uprightly, but those who despise him are devious in their ways.*

God wants us to know Him, to fear Him not to be afraid of Him and stay away from Him; to be in awe of Him and draw closer to Him. The more we fear Him – are awed by His kindness and love towards us –

### **The more we want to know Him and enjoy Him**

This has always been God's desire. Prior to Adam and Eve's sin they enjoyed God's presence in the garden of Eden. After they sinned, God called out to them, He came looking for them to maintain their relationship but Adam and Eve drew away from God. That's what sin does; it breaks our fellowship with God. But God wants this relationship. He entered into a covenant relationship so we could have security with Him, knowing that He is a good God who deals with our sin out of love and desires our fellowship. Listen to when He entered into a covenant with Israel on Mt. Sinai in Ex. 20. After God spoke audibly on Mt. Sinai to Israel sharing the 10 commandments with them, we read in v.18

*Ex. 20:18 When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."*

*<sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."*

*<sup>21</sup> The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.*

Notice the two fears of God here. The one that keeps you away from God because you haven't gotten to know Him yet. While Moses approached the God and told the people, God is good. He just spoke to us. He wants a relationship with us. It results in obeying His words but in obeying His words you will have a much better life than if you were to reject Him.

Later on, God will renew His covenant with Israel and call it the New Covenant because it will include us through Jesus. These promises speak not only about Israel's future but also about the spiritual realities that we have started to experience now and will be part of in full in the future. Listen to Jer. 32:38-40

*32:37 I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. <sup>38</sup> They will be my people, and I will be their God. <sup>39</sup> I will give them singleness of heart and action, so **that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them.** <sup>40</sup> I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing*

good to them, and **I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me.** <sup>41</sup> I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul.

<sup>33:6</sup> “ ‘Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. <sup>7</sup> I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before. <sup>8</sup> I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me. <sup>9</sup> Then this city will bring me renown, joy, praise and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and **they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it.**’

Fearing God means to be in awe of God and tremble in a good sense; like getting goose bumps at something spectacular. Like being overwhelmed when you see your bride on your wedding day coming down the aisle and you are over-whelmed that this gift of love is for you. These joyful experiences in life are illustrations of what being in awe of God is. He is so good to us. He gave us life. Then He sent His Son to die for our sins. He in His sovereign grace opened our hearts to who He is. We are humbled and awed by His love and kindness. Our only response is to continue to be in awe of His grace and kindness and to ask forgiveness for when we live without that fear and wonder and to continue to grow in His love and joy through our knowledge of Him.

*Ps. 34:8 Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.*

<sup>9</sup> *Fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing.*

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