

Fear of the Fear of God

Introduction

There is something signally missing in today's church. This missing factor is so serious in its lack that it threatens to undermine everything any church or individual does. Without this component we even have cause to fear that there is only superficial Christian life and no real spirituality.

The modern church appears to pride itself on its intimacy with God. It focuses on an emotional form of worship that has more to do with entertaining the senses than kneeling before the Lord of All. A significant part of this sensual worship is closeness to God and expressing love to him in emotional or even trite sentimental terms, so satisfied are such folk that they are close to God. However, what we see is a total lack of any sense of fear of the Lord. Without this fear, it is easy for such churches to engage in features of worship that stray from superficiality into the grounds of outright error and even idolatry. Set upon a mystical emotionalism and superficial worship, the lack of godly fear leads away from reverencing God to hedonism and self-satisfaction instead of sacrificial bowing of the knees.

So, the fear of God is enormously important; but what is it?

What does 'fear' mean in, 'the fear of the Lord'.

The first thing to do is to investigate the actual words used and discover what they really mean.

The Hebrew word *pachad* (Strong's 6343) means dread, terror or an object of dread (e.g. 1 Sam 11:7). The more common Hebrew word *yir'ah* (Strong's 3374) also means terror or an awesome thing (e.g. Ps 19:9). The Hebrew verb *yare* (Strong's 3372) means to fear, be afraid, to stand in awe, to be dreadful (e.g. Deut 6:2). The Greek word *phobos* (Strong's 5401) also means fear, dread, terror and is the basis of our modern word phobia (e.g. Acts 9:31; Eph 5:21). The verb form *phobeo* (5399) means to fear, to be afraid, to flee or to reverence. Less common is the Greek word *eulabeia* (Strong's 2124) which means avoidance, reverence, veneration, caution or discretion. It is the word used in the fear of dropping something or handling delicate objects (e.g. Heb 5:7, 11:7, 12:28). This word means tender reverence or awe in connection with God.

So, the first thing to say is that although 'reverence' is implied in this word, it really means to be terrified, to dread. It cannot be watered down to mean something less than this. The fear of the Lord is more than just reverence, it is also dread; it involves great apprehension. This type of fear is a great fear not a mild fear. The level of fear is determined by the greatness of the thing feared and when applied to God the fear is great because he is infinitely great.

So, we must not nullify the strength of this word in our application of it. It means terror or dread and that is the end of it. If Scripture uses this term then we must simply accept it and learn from it, not seek to water it down.

This fear is combined with love in the believer and despair and torment in the unbeliever. The Christian, who has both love and hope from God, fears the Lord not in a slavish sense but rather with filial reverence and awe. It is the fear of a son to a father who is also the king; a fear to avoid complacency or carelessness in religion.

Where does this term mostly appear?

Though mentioned throughout Scripture, the phrase is particularly common in the Psalms and especially the Proverbs. What this tells us is that the term is associated both with our worship of God, communion with God in trouble and particularly our practical dealings in this life. If we need wisdom in dealing with the affairs of life then we need to be centring on the fear of God.

It is of no surprise, therefore, that the church that exhibits no fear of God is also the church that is superficial in worship and ungodly in its practical dealings.

The designation of true godliness

‘The fear of the Lord’, or ‘the fear of God’ is a designation applied to those who are truly God’s servants. The fear of God is associated with knowing God (Prov 2:5) and the genuine believer is not just a person who loves God but one who fears him. Thus Noah, Joseph, Abraham, Job and many others are said to have feared God. Indeed, all men are called to fear God (Rev 14:7). The Gospel call involves a duty to fear God, and men will be judged for failing to do this, but those in Christ should not be slow to fear God (1 Pt 2:17).

So why is it that so many modern Christians and churches seem afraid to fear God? Why is there such a lack of the dread of God in the church?

No focus on Scripture

The first reason is that there is such a dearth of the word of God in the churches. There is not the honour given to Scripture that there should be neither is there the understanding of the Bible amongst the people that there ought to be.

The people who study the word eagerly are those who will develop a godly fear. The basis of godliness or piety is the fear of God and the more one understands the person of God through studying Biblical doctrine, the more one will fear the Lord in the proper way. It is a tragic fact that many modern believers see no importance in thorough Bible study and instead rely upon false prophecies, trite sermons or populist paperbacks. The word has not gripped them and they glean, at best, milk from unsound sources. They have no spiritual strength to eat the meat of God’s word gained from a long-term study of the Bible.

People who do not see the importance of Scripture and true doctrine are those who also fail to fear God.

Superficiality in worship

The more one indulges in mystical emotional worship the more one will become idolatrous and focus upon a false intimacy with what is supposed to be God. In doing this one develops further and further away from the fear of God. Indeed, such folk are prone to state that they are close to God, hidden in God, lost in God or even absorbed in God; the worst form of this is to declare that they are God or a little god. There is no fear in this since they presume that their Gnostic emotionalism indicates oneness with God, which predicates no terror. The more they get lost in a mystical god the less they fear; indeed they became thrilled with this lack of fear and then manifest the terrible outcome – treating God casually and in a derogative manner. Such folk foolishly call God their ‘buddy’, ‘pal’ and such like terms, knowing nothing about the fearful majesty of God who is glorious in holiness and fearful in praises.

Mistaken ideas about God and righteousness

Many people today focus upon love as the great attribute of God and talk about God as love as if that is all he is. Consequently, they also set their lives on this same foundation, that being a Christian means always being loving, tolerant, and insipid. This is a great mistake.

The prime attribute of God is not love but holiness, as we have mentioned many times. Only holiness is spoken in triple terms regarding God (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8). Certainly God's goodness is evidenced in his love, but this is not the central feature of God's character. Those sentenced to hell will know God's glorious majesty, justice and holiness but not his love. When John says that 'God is love' he does so in the context of proving that true Christians will be loving to each because God is loving to them (1 Jn 4:7-21). He is not making a theological argument about God's being but for Christian fellowship. Since God is love and love permeates the Trinity, we also must love one another. However, God is also wrathful against sin, just, holy, all-powerful, and so on.

The Christian also is to be many things as well as loving and in many cases is not to be tolerant. He must not tolerate sin in himself, he must not tolerate false teaching, he must not tolerate devilish temptation and he must condemn heresy and heretics who speak it. He must withdraw from every form of evil; he must separate from wicked brethren and he must expose wickedness and condemn it. The believer must even reject praying for certain people in obvious sin (1 Jn 5:16-17) or greeting people who have rejected the true doctrine of Christ (2 Jn 1:7-10). So there are occasions when the true believer will appear to be unloving, just as Jesus himself sometimes appeared harsh (e.g. Matt 16:23).

By having a false idea about God, which is superficial and erroneous, as well as false ideas about our walk, many have abandoned the fear of God because it does not comply with these wishy-washy ideas about God and discipleship.

The fear of God is foundational to godliness

Without the fear of God we cannot conduct ourselves properly in this world; the fear of God is absolutely vital in establishing the believer in wisdom.

Behold, the fear of the Lord, that *is* wisdom, and to depart from evil *is* understanding. Job 28:28

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments. Ps 111:10

The fear of the LORD *is* the beginning of knowledge, *but* fools despise wisdom and instruction. Prov 1:7

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. Prov 9:10

The fear of the LORD *is* the instruction of wisdom. Prov 15:33

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. Eccles 12:13

Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who delights greatly in His commandments. Ps 112:1

In passing we must notice that the fear of God is intimately connected with obeying and delighting in his commandments. The person who fears God is known by the fact that he obeys God's will as reflected in his word. The man who does not observe Scripture does not fear God. But the chief thing to notice is that the fear of God is foundational; it is 'man's all'.

If we want to get understanding, we must fear God. If we want to get wisdom, we must fear God. If we want to get knowledge, we must fear God. If we want divine instruction, we must fear God. If we want to do God's will, we must first fear God. Without the fear of God we will achieve nothing, amount to nothing and become nothing. Any great achievement done without being founded in the fear of God will come to no good; however outstanding and lauded that achievement may be. Men may build great churches or found powerful missions, they may sponsor many conferences and be applauded by thousands, but if they do not fear God their work will be destroyed by fire and forgotten.

Unless we fear God nothing we do will be of any spiritual benefit and will not glorify the Lord. Our lives are pointless if we do not fear God.

How do we know if we fear God?

Obedience

Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who delights greatly in His commandments. Ps 112:1

Primarily we know that we fear God because we obey his commandments. Those who fear God do his will. This does not mean that we will not make many mistakes. Abraham made some serious mistakes regarding his wife when travelling, but overall he was said to fear God because he had faith in God's covenant promise and sought to live righteously. Due to the presence of the old nature, we will always sin; however, the disposition of our lives should be righteous. We may make mistakes, but generally we seek to obey the word of God as far as we understand it.

However, those who place no importance in the Bible in real terms, those who do not spend time studying it to understand God's will, cannot fear God at all. Worse still are those supposed Christians who deny the validity and authority of God's word; either in statements to that effect (as some Charismatic leaders have done) or in practice in ignoring it in favour of prophecies or the words of men. Such folk do not fear God and their fruit will finally manifest this at the end.

If we follow God's commandments we will observe Biblical doctrine. So those folk who deny Biblical doctrine, or declare that obeying doctrine is futile, do not fear God. Those people who have no time for theology, who never look at a catechism or a creed, who never read helpful sermons or books on doctrine, who never listen to sound preachers and who despise sound teaching – do not fear God.

Withholding nothing from God

I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only *son*, from me. Gen 22:12

Abraham's commitment to God was evidenced by his preparedness to sacrifice his only son, the son of promise upon whom rested the whole covenant blessing. It was in his seed that all nations would be blessed and indeed from whom came the Lord Jesus, the covenant head. This was an enormous sacrificial test. Abraham was ready to do this since he believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead; that was how strong his faith in God was. We know this from Heb 11:19, which is a comment on Gen 22:5 ('we will come back').

The man who fears God is not afraid to sacrifice everything he has to the purpose of God; he withholds nothing from the Lord, whatever he asks. The will of God has complete control of his life and nothing of this world has a strong grip on his affections.

Following truth

Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness. Ex 18:21

The man who fears God is focused on the truth. This does not just mean the truth of doctrine but applies to all things. He is a man of sincerity in his dealings with others; he hates lies and evil propaganda and always behaves honestly. However, chiefly what is in mind here is the truth of God, that which is revealed in his word as right doctrine. No one who hates theology can fear God because theology is the study of the truth about God and the man who fears God yearns to know more about him.

Truth is central to righteousness. The righteous man establishes himself in the truth of God and strives to understand more and more about this truth. The consequence in his life is that he abounds in truth and is full of integrity in his fellowship with others. He is straight talking. The centrality of truth in Christian ethics is shown symbolically by it being described as the belt that holds all the spiritual armour together in Eph 6:14.

The man who fears God is seen by his sincerity and focus upon the truth.

Hating evil

The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate. Prov 8:13

The man who fears God will hate all forms of evil. This means that toleration of wickedness is not acceptable for the believer; he cannot fellowship with iniquity and lawlessness and must withdraw from all forms of it because he hates it as God does. The true believer does not just uphold goodness but must also condemn wickedness and hate it.

The man who fears God will always grow in holiness because he hates sin. They can be seen in their righteous lives, affirming the good and condemning the bad.

Fruit of the fear of the Lord

Life

The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life. Prov 14:27

The fear of the LORD leads to life, and he who has it will abide in satisfaction; he will not be visited with evil. Prov 19:23

The fear of the Lord is associated with life because only those who are united to Christ in spiritual union can manifest this fear. Genuine fear of God, as with pure worship, is only possible in those who have been born again and have spiritual life. Without the presence of the Spirit of God there is no fear of God.

The Spirit works from the heart of the believer, empowering his spirit and mind to walk in faith and holiness (2 Cor 3:3). Thus it is from the heart that the springs of life flow (Prov 4:23). In non-believers the heart only spews forth corruption and evil thoughts (Gen 6:5) but the believer who submits to God and obeys his law manifests life from his heart. When the believer puts on the old nature, he acts like fleshly men, but when he puts on the new nature, the life of Christ, his heart acts in accordance with the fear of God.

Thus the fear of the Lord in the heart equates to other expressions that determine godliness: walking in the Spirit; abiding in Christ, putting on the new man, living by faith, wearing the armour of God etc. When the believer does these things, the result is always a manifestation of the life of God. If you are walking in the fear of God you will be manifesting the life of God. Thus those who do not fear God have no life. Those who do not fear God and obey his word have only a pretence of spiritual life and not any real life.

Holiness

By the fear of the LORD one departs from evil. Prov 16:6

In the same way those who fear God will walk in holiness. Since the life of God is holy, those who walk in spiritual life will express holiness. The fruit of having the fear of God in the heart is a departing from evil, living a repentant life of following Christ. Thus anyone who does not depart from evil has no fear of God and no life. Tolerating evil in one's life is proof positive that there is no fear of God.

Wisdom & knowledge

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge. Prov 1:7

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. Prov 9:10

The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom. Prov 15:33

The fear of the Lord leads to knowledge and wisdom because those who fear God are determined to understand his ways and thirst for a fuller understanding of his being. Understanding anything of great importance in this life first requires a person to be submitted to God, fearing God.

The greatest secular minds on this planet, the theoretical physicists, spend lifetimes dreaming up ways of harmonising conflicting radical theories about reality and cosmogony. Their theses become incredibly complex arrangements of propositions that even they cannot understand. No one really understands quantum physics for example. These hypotheses, such as black holes, event horizons holding knowledge, string theory, holographic reality, and parallel worlds hold the world in awe and theoreticians are lauded as the brainiest people in the world, such as Stephen Hawking. Yet many of their ideas contradict Scripture (and each other) and have no basis in objective proof. There is no factual evidence for dark matter or black holes for example and historical scientific discovery repeatedly shows us that a new discovery completely negates as host of previous scientific axioms. Thus all these supposedly clever scientists are displayed as fools over and over again. The reason for this is that they do not fear God. Their starting point is wrong (such as evolutionary theory, the big bang or the claim that the speed of light never varied) and because they do not fear God their wisdom is folly.

Confidence

In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence. Prov 14:26

How do we gain confidence? Not by self-assertion, assurance or personal strength but by fearing God. The less we trust in ourselves and the more we trust in God, the greater will be our confidence. The heart that fears God is a heart that puts its trust in God with assurance; that heart will have confidence and courage because it is resting in the omnipotent almighty God. If God is for us who can be against us.

Conclusion

The fear of God is missing from much of today's church because it doesn't know God. It follows a perverse idea about God that has been popularised by years of false teaching and error. Where so many supposed Christians have no desire to even read, let alone study, God's word, it should not surprise us that there is an absence of the fear of the Lord. However, if men do not fear God in reverential worship now, they will one day fear God in dread and horror on the Last Day.

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