

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

By Rev. Linda Holmes

The fear of the Lord, although frequently referred to in the Scriptures, often remains an unclear concept to believers. One reason the fear of the Lord is sometimes misunderstood is that the word “fear” suggests something negative and to be avoided, as people tend to stay away from the things they fear. Also, fear has torment (1 John 4:8) and can bind and limit an individual in his or her actions.

The fear of the Lord, however, is not a tormenting fear. Rather, it can be defined as an awesomely majestic respect, and an exceedingly dreadful reverence. In order to understand this concept, we will look at what the Scriptures say about it.

The fear of the Lord is both an Old and New Testament concept. It is an eternal distinguishing characteristic of the believer’s attitude toward God. Psalm 19:9 states that the *“fear of the Lord...endures forever.”* The Church Age began with the fear of the Lord as can be seen in the book of Acts and will end with the fear of the Lord, as can be seen in the book of Revelation.

In Acts chapter 5 a husband and wife named Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property and kept back part of the proceeds. They then lied about the amount they received. Subsequently, they were both struck dead for “lying to God” and “testing the Spirit of the Lord.” The result was that *“great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things”* (Acts 5:11). According to Acts 9:31, the Church then continued to walk in the fear of the Lord (also see Acts 10:1-2 and Acts 10:35).

In Revelation 19:5 we read of multitudes around the throne of God, with a voice from the throne crying out, *“Praise our God, all you His servants and those who fear Him, both small and great!”* It does not state, *“...those who love Him, both small and the great,”* or *“...those who serve Him, both small and the great...”* Rather, the description of that multitude worshipping the Lord at the end of the Church Age is *“those who **fear** Him.”* Nehemiah 5:9 asks the question, *“Should you not walk in the fear of the Lord?”* The correct answer to that question is “Yes, I should walk in the fear of the Lord.” This article will help us to understand why we should, and how to do that very thing.

TWO INFLUENCES

There are two main influences God uses to work in the lives of His people. They are the love of God and the fear of the Lord. The power of love is seen in Song of Solomon 1:4 where Solomon stated, *“Draw me and we will run after you...”* It is this influence of love that often draws people to the Lord and keeps them “running after Him.” However, there is another influence that God uses, and that is the fear of the Lord. Unlike the love of God that stands in front of us to draw and encourage us to go forward, the fear of the Lord is something that stands behind us and says, *“This is the way, walk in it whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left.”*

This can be illustrated by the life of a young man we knew with the call of God for full time ministry. Worrying about the difficulties he would encounter in the ministry, he resisted God’s call, pursued a career in business and eventually began to drift away from the Lord. One day we received a phone call from one of his family members. They told us that the young man was dying, and requested that my husband go to the hospital to pray for him. Upon entering the hospital room, the Spirit of God came upon my husband and he began to prophesy. The word of the Lord to this man was that he was like Jonah who ran from God and found himself in the belly

of a whale. If he continued to resist God, he would die, but if he would repent and yield himself to the Lord, the Lord would heal him. With the fear of death looming over him, that young man began to earnestly call on the Lord and repent of going his own way. Within a day he was healed, out of the hospital, and on his way to serving the Lord. Yet it was not the love of God that drew him back, it was the fear of the Lord, which stood behind him and said, *“This is the way, walk in it!”*

WHAT EXACTLY IS THE FEAR OF THE LORD?

Firstly, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”* (Prov.9:10 & Ps.111:10). The actual foundation for receiving wisdom, or the very entrance of wisdom into the human heart comes through the fear of the Lord. Wisdom is essential for every Christian in order to live life skillfully and successfully. We can never over emphasize the importance of wisdom. As Proverbs 4:5 & 7 state, *“Get wisdom! Get understanding! ...Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom.”* Yet in order to receive wisdom, one must first have the fear of the Lord operational in his or her life.

Secondly, *“The Fear of the Lord is to hate evil”* (Prov.8:13). *“By the fear of the Lord, men depart from evil”* (Prov.16:6). *“Fear the Lord and depart from evil”* (Prov.3:7). *“...God is come to test you, that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin”* (Ex.20:20). *“Come children, I will teach you the fear of the Lord...depart from evil, do good, seek peace and pursue it”* (Ps.34:11 & 14). The fear of the Lord is clearly linked to the hatred of evil.

Second Corinthians 7:1 states that we are to *“perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord.”* True holiness is not gained by following outward rules and regulations. Many churches and organizations have set standards for their people to follow. These rules might be important as they show an outward conformity to a certain standard. Yet these outward regulations are incapable of producing holiness. True holiness is entered into through the fear of the Lord and is based upon the hatred of evil.

Hebrews 1:9 declares that Jesus loved righteousness and hated iniquity. We also must have these two things operating in our lives to have true holiness, as one is not enough. The love of righteousness without the hatred of evil breeds hypocrisy. On the other hand, the hatred of evil without the love of righteousness produces intolerance and fundamentalist extremism.

Samson is an example of a man who loved righteousness but did not hate evil. He functioned under the anointing of the Spirit of Might, which is one of the seven Spirits of the Lord mentioned in Isaiah 11:2. He yielded himself to the anointing placed upon him and risked his life serving the Lord, *but* he did not hate evil. He loved what was right *and* he loved what was wrong.

As a result, his life was a confusion of two ways. Pastors do not preach from Samson’s life to encourage their young people to be like him. Rather, Samson’s life is used as a warning to flee from sexual sin and compromise. He did not fear God and therefore did not turn away from evil.

WHY SHOULD WE FEAR GOD?

The key to why we fear God is given in Isaiah 59:18-19. There we read, *“According to their deeds, accordingly He will repay...So shall they fear the name of the Lord from the west, and His glory from the rising of the sun...”* (Is.59:18-19). Woven within the fear of the Lord is a vital truth that is often overlooked. That truth is that God is the just rewarder of mankind’s deeds. As stated in the above verse from Isaiah, they will fear the name of the Lord because *“according to their deeds, so He will repay.”*

King Solomon echoed this in his summation of life recorded in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14. *“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: **Fear God** and keep His commandments, for this is the*

whole duty of man. **For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil.**”

This conversation is recorded in Luke 23:39-41 between the two thieves crucified on either side of Christ. “Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, ‘If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.’ But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not even **fear God**, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for **we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.**’”

In 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, the Apostle Paul told the believers that the foundation of Christ had been laid in their lives, but they were to “let each man be careful how he builds upon it.” Our firm foundation of faith in Christ stands secure; however, the foundation is only the first part of a building. We are to build upon that foundation throughout our lifetime by our words and actions. Paul exhorted and warned each one to “be careful how he builds.” The reason for this warning is given in 2 Corinthians 5:10-11a. There it states, “For we must all appear before **the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done whether good or bad. Knowing, therefore the terror (fear) of the Lord, we persuade men...**”

The word for *judgment seat* in the New Testament Greek is *bema*, which means a raised platform or reviewing stand. This was the place where the judges of a contest viewed the contest and decided which rewards to give to each contestant. It can be compared to the judges’ stand in an Olympic competition where the contestants’ performance is reviewed and rewarded. In this same way, we will each appear before the reviewing stand of Christ where our words, motives, attitudes and actions will be reviewed and judged by Christ.

There is the testimony of a pastor who was raised from the dead at a church service in Nigeria. While the evangelist was preaching, the man, who was lying in a coffin in the basement of the church, returned to life. He brought with him an amazing testimony of his journey to both heaven and hell and the things he was allowed to see in each place. He stated that while in hell he heard a man shouting to him, “I am a pastor, I only stole church money and I am ready to refund it immediately.” This pastor in hell had become a thief who eventually robbed his own soul of salvation.

Knowing that we will give an account of how we lived our lives, and will receive a reward for our actions, should produce in each of us a healthy dose of the fear of the Lord. As is stated in 2 Corinthians 5:11, “**Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men...**”

The Apostle Paul also stated in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 that every man’s work will be tested by fire. Those who build on the foundation of Jesus Christ in their lives with gold (which spiritually speaks of the divine nature), silver (redemption), and precious stones (godly virtues) will find when they enter eternity and pass through God’s holy fire, that their works will remain intact and they will receive a reward. However, those whose deeds have been like wood, hay and stubble (the works of the flesh), will have their works burned up and they will suffer loss. Because of the reality of these things we are exhorted to “be careful” how we build in this life, for in eternity, it will be too late to change.

One day a group of students from our Bible school were having a discussion when one of them remarked, “I hope I won’t have to sweep in heaven.” At our Bible school the students are assigned daily work duties and sweeping is always one of those duties. However, we know there will be no need to sweep in heaven. As I wondered what she meant by her comment, the students’ conversation continued and this sister clarified her meaning. She hoped that upon entry to heaven when she passes through the fire, that all her works will not be reduced to an unsightly pile of ashes so that she will be handed a broom by an angel and told, “Sweep!” It was a good reminder to all to be careful how we live.

HEAVEN HAS A SYSTEM OF REWARDS

Heaven has a system of rewards that are based upon our good works on earth. While those works do not save us, nonetheless they are what give us our heavenly rewards. As Proverb 24:12 states, *“He will render to every man according to His work.”* Jesus said in Matthew 10:42 that if anyone gives a cold drink to someone in the name of a disciple, they will in no way lose their reward. In heaven every smile, every handshake, every pat on the back of encouragement will be rewarded. We often want to do the great works of God but many times the great works are the small works that no one notices.

Several years ago my husband and I went to another country to hold pastors’ seminars. One Sunday, we split up to speak at different churches. I was brought to a church and dropped off at the door as my driver disappeared into a crowd of people. I was quite uncomfortable, not knowing anyone or understanding a word of their language, and being alone, I hoped that someone would meet me to tell me what to do or where to go. However, I stood there in that hot, crowded church for quite a while and no one approached me, greeted me, or acknowledged that I was there at all. I was becoming more uncomfortable by the minute when finally a little boy with Down syndrome approached me. He stood and looked at me for a minute and then he took my hand and led me over to a chair. He sat next to me on the bench and fanned me with a hand-fan so I wouldn’t be quite so hot. He also offered me his half-filled water bottle in case I was thirsty. If I were asked who was the greatest member of that church, I would not answer that it was the pastor, or chief overseer, or any of the people there who appeared so prominent. No, I would answer that in my opinion, the greatest member of that church was the little boy with Down syndrome. He fulfilled that day the words of Christ in Matthew 25:35-40, *“...I was a stranger, and you took Me in.”*

There is a testimony of a man who was brought to heaven. When asked what impressed him the most in heaven, he said, “I was most impressed with the reversal of earthly conditions. I was amazed to see that some who were expected to be high up in heaven were low down, and some who were expected to be low down were high up. I pointed to one of the most colonnaded and grandly domed residences in the city, and asked, ‘Who lives there?’ ‘The widow who gave two coins’ was the reply.” The Lord measures greatness differently than man. Heaven reveals it all, and rewards both our motives and actions.

Continuing the principle that God is a rewarder of mans’ deeds, Galatians 6:7 states, *“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for what a man sows this he shall also reap.”* The fact that God renders to each man according to His work (Prov.24:12) should produce in every believer a healthy, active, full-scale dose of the fear of the Lord.

JACOB REAPED DECEPTION

Jacob is an excellent example of one who reaped what he sowed. His name means *deceiver*, and his character reflected his name. He disguised himself as his brother Esau and deceived his father into giving him the firstborn blessing and birthright. However, God did not let the matter rest. After all, whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap. In fleeing from the subsequent wrath of his brother Esau, Jacob ran straight into the household of his mother’s brother and flung himself upon the ever-shifty dealings of his Uncle Laban- the master deceiver! Jacob had earlier tricked his father into giving him the firstborn birthright by taking advantage of his old father's blindness. In a great turn of events, Jacob found himself tricked in a similar way by his uncle. Taking advantage of Jacob’s inability to see in the darkness of the tent, Uncle Laban gave Jacob his daughter Leah as wife instead of Rachel.

During those trying years working for his uncle, Jacob was deceived ten times even though he had only sowed deceit two times (Gen.31:7). You see, you always reap more than you sow - it is a principle of nature and economics. No one would expect to reap only one mango when planting a mango seed, or one tomato when planting a tomato seed. When someone plants, he or she expects to reap much more than what was planted. It was through Jacob reaping the fruit of his deceptive actions year after year that he learned to hate deception and fear the Lord.

In Luke 6:37-38, Jesus declared, *“Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.”*

This scripture passage is often quoted when it comes to finances and giving. “Pressed down, shaken together and running over is what I want God to give to me” is in many peoples’ minds as they make their way to the offering plate. Although this Scripture passage *could* be used in reference to finances as it portrays a true principle, Jesus was not talking about finances at all when He stated this. Instead, He was speaking about interpersonal relationships and attitudes of the heart towards others. He was saying, “Be merciful to others and you will receive mercy - pressed down, shaken together and running out all over. Judge not, for if you judge, you will be judged, pressed down, shaken together and running out all over.” The same measure we give to others will be measured back to us, pressed down, shaken together and running out all over.

David Reaped Loyalty

David is another man who reaped what he sowed. Fortunately, he had sowed seeds of loyalty towards King Saul. Even though Saul was a neurotic, backslidden ruler with an evil spirit, David refused to rise up against him. Years later, when it came time for David to reap, David found himself surrounded by loyal men. Some of them even risked their lives breaking through the Philistine armies’ ranks just to fetch David a drink from the well of Bethlehem. David reaped God’s mercy, even during times of judgment for his personal sin. He reaped God’s protection, and he reaped loyalty when he should have been dead many times! He had refused to stretch out his hand against Saul, and therefore his enemies were not able to harm him.

Shiphrah and Puah Reaped Families

Another example of reaping what one sows is found in Exodus 1:15-16 concerning Shiphrah and Puah. Pharaoh commanded these two Israelite midwives to kill every male baby that was born, yet verse 17 states, *“But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive.”* The punishment for disobeying Pharaoh could have been death, yet they disobeyed the command because they “feared God” more than they feared Pharaoh. As a result, verse 21 states, *“...because the midwives feared God...He provided households for them.”* They saved the children of strangers, and in return, reaped families of their own.

Proverbs 21:13 continues this thought of sowing and reaping, stating, *“Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry and not be heard.”* This Scripture remains vivid to me through an incident that happened in Palawan where my family and I were missionaries. One day a beggar came to our door asking for money. We gave to him and a few days later, he came again asking for help. This happened repeatedly over the next few weeks. Rain or shine, this man, who I will call “Paul,” would come banging on our door asking for help. He was crippled and very sick as well, yet even in his pitiable condition, I began to find him to be an annoyance and started grumbling about

him. One day when he made his way to our door in the pouring rain, I had had enough and asked my husband if we could stop giving to him and simply tell him to stop bothering us. My husband made one comment in reply. He said, "Did you see his shoes?" Because of his twisted legs, Paul literally had to drag himself around and one of his shoes was completely worn through, being held together only by string. Even so, I became so annoyed by Paul's constant begging from us, that one day I went into my room to try to pray him away. As I knelt down the Holy Spirit spoke to me. He asked me one question. He said, "Did you see Paul's shoes?" I told Him that I had noticed. He then explained that one day my children would need shoes, and as many missionaries have experienced, I might have to pray for the finances to buy them. I saw it so vividly that day- year after year of shoes- shoes for school, for gym, banquet shoes, shoes for summer, shoes for winter. There seemed to be no end of the shoes my children would eventually need until they reached adulthood. The Holy Spirit then said, "What am I to answer you when you cry to Me for shoes for your children after you have shut your heart to Paul?" "*Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry and not be heard*" (Prov.21:13) was my reply. The fear of the Lord seemed to wake me out of a hard-hearted stupor and the love of God began to melt my heart. The next day we had Paul brought to the store, had him pick out a pair of shoes, and shared the gospel with him. He was delighted and deeply touched. We saw him a few times after that, but never again at our door as he only begged in the market as his health worsened. A few months later Paul died. That incident happened many years ago. My children are now adults and I can honestly say that because of Paul and the fear of the Lord, throughout the years my children have never lacked shoes.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THE FEAR OF THE LORD:

There is an amazingly practical aspect to the fear of the Lord. It can influence our actions, attitudes and relationships on a daily basis. Here are five practical out-workings of the fear of the Lord:

1. "*Therefore you shall not oppress one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God*" (Lev.25:17). This Scripture is referring specifically to financial oppression due to artificially high prices in the business world. When selling something, sell it at a fair price, don't try to squeeze the last cent out of the buyer, but fear God. Why? Because eventually, you will buy something and if you squeeze the last cent out of others, you will find others trying to squeeze every cent out of you. Jesus said, "*Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.*" Why? Because others will eventually do to you as you have done to others. It is the law of sowing and reaping.

2. "*You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I am the Lord*" (Lev.19:32). Simply stated, "respect the elderly and fear God." Unless we die young, we will all grow old. It is good to be reminded that the same way we treat the elderly will be the way others treat us when we are old and gray. We want to be sure we are reaping good things when it comes time for someone to change our bedpan!

3. "*Take no usury or interest from him [a fellow Christian] but fear your God, that your brother may live with you. You shall not lend him your money for usury, nor lend him your food at a profit*" (Lev.25:36). Or simply put, "Don't lend to your brother with interest - fear God!" Again the meaning is clear. If you are loaning money or possessions to a Christian, do it with a willing and helpful heart, not with an eye to make a profit off of him. The time will come when you may need help from others and you don't want to find yourself in the hands of a financial loan shark.

4. Leviticus 25:42,43 states in referring to masters with their servants, "*You shall not rule over him [your servant] with rigor, but you shall fear your God.*" Ephesians 6:8-9 explains why, stating, "*Whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven...*" While slavery was permitted in both the Old and New Testament times, in

modern societies it has been done away with. These verses, however, can aptly be applied to the treatment of employees by their employers, or assistant ministers by their senior leaders. Employers are exhorted to “fear God,” remembering that in reality, we are *all* servants and our Master is in heaven. As Ephesians 6:8-9 declares, the way an employer treats his employees will be the way God treats the employer. *“He will also receive the same from the Lord.”*

5. Deuteronomy 14:23 tells us, *“And you shall eat before the Lord your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstlings of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.”* Malachi 3:9-12 follows up this teaching of tithing by stating that if we tithe, God promises to bless us, but if we fail to tithe, God promises to curse us. The Scriptures make it clear that the tithe belongs to the Lord. We can look at it simply as the rent God charges for the privilege of living on His green earth. If we do not give Him what rightfully belongs to Him, we will not reap the blessings the earth is meant to give to us. Instead we will reap drought, financial strain, sickness, barrenness and a multitude of other ailments. Therefore, fear God, and tithe.

The Fear of the Lord is a Requirement for Leaders

The fear of the Lord is not optional for leaders, it is a foundation that needs to be firmly in place and operating in one’s life. In choosing leaders who would help govern the matters of the nation, Moses was told, *“Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness, and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties and rulers of tens,”* Ex.18:21.

Second Samuel 23:3 states, *“He who rules over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God.”* And referring to the law of administration of a king, Deut.17:19 states, *“And it [the Law] shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren...”*

Conclusion

Through these practical Scriptures we understand that the fear of the Lord is both an inward attitude of heart towards God and outward caring actions towards others. It is fundamental to obtaining wisdom and true holiness. May every reader take this to heart and be one who by the fear of the Lord will reap a harvest of good things. As Nehemiah 5:9 states, *“Should we not walk in the fear of the Lord?”* Let us respond with a resounding, “Yes!”