

Delighting in the Fear of the Lord

As you may know, one of the most frequent commands in the Bible is, “Fear not!” Or “Do not be afraid!” Instead, we should trust in the Lord, in his protection and care. And so it can be a bit confusing when we also read repeatedly in Scripture about “the fear of the Lord” as a good thing. We’re even commanded to “fear the Lord” (Deut. 10:20) or “Fear God” (1 Peter 2:17). Not surprisingly, it’s challenging to discern exactly what it meant by “the fear of the Lord.”

I’ve noticed over the years that whenever the topic of “the fear of the Lord” comes up, the main question we want answered is, “What type of fear are we talking about?” Someone will point out that it obviously can’t mean being terrified of God, right? Someone else might suggest that the fear of the Lord means that you are awe-struck at his magnificence and holiness; and so it’s more of a reverential fear for God. Someone else might quote 1 John 4:18 which says that “. . . perfect love casts out fear,” and argue that fearing the Lord isn’t appropriate for genuine believers.

As I’ve studied this issue, I’ve become convinced that trying to figure out “what type of fear are we talking about” is not the best approach. In his commentary on the book of Proverbs, Bruce Waltke points out that the expression “the fear of the LORD” is a collocation or *idiom*. You can’t figure out the meaning of an idiom by just by knowing the definition of the individual words. He points out, for example, that “. . .one will not understand ‘butterfly’ by analyzing ‘butter’ and ‘fly’ independently. So also ‘fear of [the LORD]’ cannot be understood by analyzing ‘fear’ and ‘[LORD]’ separately” (*Proverbs*, p. 38). It’s better to keep the entire expression “the fear of the Lord” in tact and study how it is used in different contexts and draw our conclusions accordingly.

What we find in Scripture is that “the fear of the LORD” means different things in different contexts. It is always the fear ***of the LORD*** - Yahweh, the God of Israel. The ***LORD*** is always the same. But the the ***fear*** of the Lord means different things in different contexts. The Scriptures talk about three different categories of people fearing (or not fearing) the Lord.

This morning we are going to discuss the nature of “the fear of the Lord” for these three different categories of people. The first two categories describe people who don’t yet know God. The third category of people fear the Lord in a way that is healthy, life-giving, and even “delightful.” This third way of fearing the Lord is commanded and urged and modeled throughout Scripture. We’ll spend most of our time on this.

I should mention that since “the fear of the Lord” is such a vast topic (running from Genesis to Revelation), I’m going to be referencing numerous Scriptures in this message. But I would invite you to look them up and see if you agree with the conclusions I’m making. The manuscript of this sermon will be posted on our web site tomorrow morning; you will find the Scripture references and quotations there.

Three categories of people “fearing the LORD”:

First, some people **Fear God's Punishment/Judgment**. A number of Scriptures speak of the enemies of God "fearing the Lord" in the sense of fearing the punishment he might inflict upon them. In 2 Chronicles 17:10, for example, we are told that after God gave victory to Israel, the "fear of the Lord" came upon surrounding nations:

10 And the fear of the Lord fell upon all the kingdoms of the lands that were around Judah, and they made no war against Jehoshaphat.

The surrounding kingdoms saw God's track record of defeating Judah's enemies and were terrified of what the Lord/YHWH might do to them. So they quit waging war against Judah/Israel. Anybody here in high school? Does your high school have a football team? Let's say that a week from Sunday your high school football team is playing the Kansas City Chiefs. Between now and next Sunday your team would have a sense of dread because there is a zero percent chance you would win. That's what the kingdoms around Israel felt. That's what Pharaoh felt after the ten plagues in Egypt. If you are God's enemy, you **should** fear what he might do to you.

This is the type of fear that evaporates when you become God's friend. That's what 1 John 4:18 is talking about. If you believe that God so loved you that he sent his unique Son to die on the cross to pay for your sin, you have such a deep, abiding experience of God's love that you are no longer terrified about what God might do to you.

18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

If you experience the perfect love of God expressed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, you no longer fear being punished for your sins. The punishment you deserved fell upon him. As we'll see, there is still a healthy "fear of the Lord" that we should have as believers, but it doesn't involve a fear of punishment. You are no longer afraid of God.

Second, some people have **Have No Fear of God**. In Romans 3 Paul is making his case that all people and all categories of people have sinned and therefore need forgiveness and salvation through faith in Christ. In verses 10-18 Paul quotes numerous OT passages which speak of the universal need for forgiveness. In verse 18 Paul concludes his list by quoting Psalm 36:1.

18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

In other words they could not care less what God thinks about their lives. They don't seek God. They aren't afraid of God's punishment. They say and do whatever they want. Numerous Scriptures in the OT warn that that's a foolish way to live your life (see Psalm 14:1, Proverbs 3:7, etc.).

By contrast, Proverbs 9:10 tells us:

10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,

and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

Since a healthy fear of the Lord is foundational for wisdom, thinking, “I am my own master and I know what’s best for me,” is foolish. Dallas Willard commented on this way of thinking in *Renovation of the Heart*.

“ . . . One begins to get smart when he or she fears being crosswise of God: fear of not doing what he wants and not being as he requires. . . ”

***Fear** is the anticipation of harm. The intelligent person recognizes that his or her well-being lies in being in harmony with God and what God is doing in the “kingdom.” God is not mean, but he is dangerous. It is the same with other great forces he has placed in reality. Electricity and nuclear power, for example, are not mean, but they are dangerous. One who does not, in a certain sense, “worry” about God, simply isn’t smart.”*

No analogy is perfect. God is unlike electricity in that he’s not an impersonal force. But the analogy makes the point that we’re not very smart if we are careless about God. Why? Because he is our Creator, we are all accountable to him for what we believe and therefore how we live.

This discussion leads us to the third option: other people **Delight in the Fear of the Lord**. They gladly, wholeheartedly do everything we can to align themselves with God as he really is (i.e. according to what is revealed about him in Scripture). On a heart-level, they want to please and experience God as fully as possible.

I don’t know if you’ve ever thought about “delighting in the fear of the Lord,” but that’s an expression that’s found at least twice in the Old Testament. In Nehemiah 1, Nehemiah is in exile in Babylon praying. He is heartbroken because the exiles who have returned to Jerusalem haven’t been able to rebuild the walls. He had decided to do something very dangerous, namely, ask the king if he would allow him to return and lead the effort to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. So he prays and asks for God’s blessing. Notice how he expresses himself in Nehemiah 1:11.

11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of **your servants who delight to fear your name**, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.” Now I was cupbearer to the king.

Nehemiah was expressing to God that he and others were praying from a heart fully devoted to him. Because they understood who he really is - the Creator and Sustainer of the universe - they were his **servants**. Everybody serves somebody, and they served him. And **they delighted to fear his name** (which means to fear him). It brought them great joy to align their lives with God and what he was doing in the world. For us there should be joy in fearing the Lord.

I think Tremper Longman captured the sense of this healthy fear of the Lord. He is commenting on Proverbs 9:10, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

This fear is not the fear that makes us run, but it is the fear that makes us pay attention and listen. Fear of the Lord makes us humble . . . rather than proud and “wise in our own eyes” (see Prov. 3:5, 7; 6:17; 11:2; 15:25; etc.). . . The fear of the Lord inevitably leads to obedience.

The key idea is that if we understand God as he truly is (not believing some caricature of him), we will be drawn toward him. Why? Because he is the most beautiful, intelligent, just, compassionate being in the universe. The last thing we will want to do is offend him. Rather, we want to experience him as fully as possible. And so we **delight in the fear of the Lord** in a way that produces all sorts of good fruit:

- * The fear of the Lord makes us **humble** because we acknowledge that he’s superior to us in every way.
- * The fear of the Lord makes us **teachable** (see Isaiah 66:2) because we realize that he knows things nobody else does, things that we desperately need to know.
- * The fear of the Lord makes us **obedient** because we believe deep down that he knows better than us how we should live our lives. We aren’t passionate about following a set of rules; we are passionate about God and therefore about doing his will.
- * The fear of the Lord makes us **worshippers** because we understand that he is worthy (Revelation 4:11, 5:12).

At this point you may be wondering if this type of delight in the fear of the Lord is really attainable. We all know a few people who seem to delight in everything about God. But maybe they’re the exception. Maybe the rest of us have to fake it when it comes to delighting in the fear of the Lord. Nothing could be further from the truth. Let me point you to two Scriptures that should fill us with hope and anticipation that we can be people who delight in the fear of the Lord.

First, this healthy fear of the Lord is actually **promised** to everyone who enters into a relationship with God through the new covenant in Christ’s blood. In Jeremiah 32:38–40 the Lord says:

38 And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. 39 I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them.

There is great blessing in fearing the Lord. He continues:

40 I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. *And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.*

God is describing the covenant that was established through the blood of Jesus. This fear of the Lord binds us to God so that we don’t turn away from him. . . .(see also Jer.

33:9). Remember, this fear of the Lord makes us run toward him, not away from him! In the new covenant God is committed to teaching us how to fear him in a healthy, life-giving way.

Second, the healthy fear of the Lord is embodied in Jesus himself. In Isaiah 11:1-5, the passage read earlier, Isaiah describes the coming Messiah, the one who would rescue us from sin. This Messiah, of course, is identified in the New Testament as Jesus Himself. Notice what Isaiah says about King Jesus in verses 2 and 3.

2 And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
3 And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. . .

The term “delight” has the connotation of being fragrant. The idea is that the fear of the Lord is a pleasing aroma to this promised Messiah. Fearing God was his delight! The fear of the Lord looks different for Jesus than for us because he is in no way inferior to God the Father. But we do see the core elements of the fear of the Lord in Jesus’ life.

- * Jesus was **humble**. Philippians 2 tells us that Jesus “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”
- * In a unique sense, Jesus was **teachable**. Hebrews 5:8 tells us that “although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.”
- * Jesus was **obedient** to his Father in heaven. In John 4:34 he said, “My food is to do the will of my Father in heaven.”

Jesus delighted in the fear of the Lord. As his disciples we can learn from him how to delight in the fear of the Lord also. Jesus modeled and taught the fear of the Lord in beautiful ways. All of this means that delighting in the fear of the Lord can be ours through Jesus Christ and the new covenant in his blood.

We will return to the topic of delighting in the fear of the Lord repeatedly this fall in our sermon series (beginning next week), *Becoming Wise*. The three primary Wisdom books - Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job - put the fear of the Lord front and center. So today’s message is in some ways a preview to what we’ll be talking about throughout the fall.

This past week I found myself in a situation that made me very anxious. I’m going to be vague about the details. . . it was just me. When I’m anxious I often get introspective and self-centered and feel overwhelmed. (I know, I need to see somebody. . .) When I started going down that path, the thought occurred to me, “What does it look like to ‘delight in the fear of the Lord’ in the mist of anxiety?” In other words, what if I take a God-centered approach to my anxiety? What does it look like to practice what I’m about to preach on Sunday? Maybe it means to be humble and teachable and obedient and worshipful. . .

And so I spent some time in worship. I remembered how Job fell to the ground and worshipped when he experienced catastrophic loss, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” In the midst of anxiety, I thanked God for the many, many things he’s done for **me** through Jesus. I dwelt on the fact that the most powerful, beautiful, compassionate One in the universe is radically for me (he proved that at the cross). That put my anxiety in a different light.

I spent some time humbling myself before God, admitting to him some things I’d done wrong and acknowledging some weaknesses.

I went to Scripture to remind myself of some teachings and commands related to the thing that made me anxious. Those Scriptures are so good and true and wise. A few minutes pondering those Scriptures made me want to do God’s will.

I prayed, asking God for help/grace to be obedient to the Scriptures I’d read.

What happened? God didn’t answer my prayer the way I wanted him to - you know, instantaneously. But in his own way and in his own time he addressed my anxiety and showed me that it’s always better to run toward God than run away from him. He confirmed that there is great blessing in fearing of the Lord.

This week you will very likely face a situation that troubles you or brings you anxiety. How will you respond? Will you become self-centered and live as if you have to solve all your problems all by yourself? There’s another option. With God’s help you can choose the fear of the Lord (we’ll see that in Proverbs 1:29). You can learn to fear the Lord (see Psalm 34:11). Move toward God in simple worship. Move toward him in humility. Be teachable. Seek to be obedient. Delight in the fear of the Lord.