

Cultivating the Fear of the Lord

Psalm 73, Proverbs 1:7

I'd like to begin by telling you about two different math teachers I had in high school. My tenth-grade algebra teacher was named Mrs. DeRuiter. This was back in the day of overhead projectors. She would write out algebra problems on the overhead projector. Mrs. DeRuiter kept water in a red plastic ketchup bottle so she could wet down the overhead projector and wipe off the marker. I can't confirm that anybody ever put ketchup in that squirt bottle, but it was talked about quite a bit. One year some kid put cellophane over the top so the water wouldn't come out. Kids would sit on the back row clicking quarters together as an annoyance. Students would systematically get up and sharpen their pencils to disrupt class. Mrs. DeRuiter, of course, disliked these little pranks, but nobody ever got in much trouble for it. Let's just say that there was very little fear of Mrs. DeRuiter.

My tenth-grade geometry teacher, on the other hand, was Coach Moore. He was a rather imposing figure: six-foot-two-inches tall, muscular, jet-black hair. Nobody would ever dream of playing pranks on Coach Moore. One day a kid fell asleep in class with his head down on his desk. Coach Moore walked over and shook the desk until he fell out on the floor. My brother actually told a classmate that Coach Moore really liked to be called "Howard" (his first name); turns out that was not the case. . . There was a very appropriate fear of Coach Moore.

I tell you about these two teachers simply to illustrate that *sometimes it is good and appropriate to fear being on the wrong side of somebody*. I'm not saying that God is like Coach Moore – not even close. But just like it was appropriate to fear getting on the wrong side of Coach Moore, it is appropriate to fear being opposed to God. It's not that God rules with an iron fist. It's not that God isn't patient and compassionate because He is. We are told over and over that God is "Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness." He really is. I've experienced that personally. And it's certainly not that we should cower in the corner in terror. After all God is the One who loves us so much that He gave His one and only Son for us; God is the One who says, "You are as the apple of My eye." It's certainly not a matter of fearing a God who wishes us harm. If that were the case, we should all just give up. God is "for us" in deeper ways than we can fathom.

Nevertheless, there are some great reasons to fear being on the wrong side of God and His ways. In other words, there are some great reasons to cultivate what the Bible calls "the fear of the Lord." Today we are going to examine Psalm 73 as a case study in cultivating the fear of the Lord. This message will serve as an introduction to the study we will begin next week in the book of Proverbs. The book of Proverbs gives an extended argument why it is good and appropriate to cultivate a fear the Lord. I hope that this message today gives us a vision for what that looks like.

A Case Study in Cultivating the Fear of the Lord: Psalm 73 (Asaph)

This Psalm describes in poetic form Asaph's spiritual journey. At one time he was a person who was jealous of people who were far from God. They seemingly got away with doing every sinful thing they could think up. He felt the lure of that type of life. But eventually he "saw through" that lifestyle. Eventually he became a person who wanted the nearness of God more than anything else. Asaph concluded that the only sane and safe way to live your

life was in close fellowship with God. As we go through this psalm I think we will all see ourselves somewhere in Asaph's journey.

In verse 1 we read the foundational truth that Asaph is communicating in this psalm. Here's the point of the psalm:

1 Surely God is good to Israel,
To those who are pure in heart!

Asaph came to the conviction that those who keep their hearts pure experience the blessing of God. He came to believe that those who walk with God experience His goodness. He will return to this conviction at the end of the psalm (v. 28). But beginning in verse 2 Asaph describes how this was a hard-fought conviction. He describes how he had gotten into a dangerous place spiritually. Instead of being strong and stable, his faith was at one time very precarious.

2 But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling,
My steps had almost slipped.
3 For I was envious of the arrogant
As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Asaph is describing a dynamic that we would be very wise to understand in our day. Asaph says that as he looked at the "prosperity of the wicked" he became envious. He wanted what they had because their lives seemed to be better than his. He goes on to describe how they seemingly lived a life of comfort and ease.

4 For there are no pains in their death,
And their body is fat.

In this context "fatness" indicates abundance and luxury. You have more than enough to eat; you certainly aren't wasting away due to hard work. The wicked even seemed to be better off than the righteous.

5 They are not in trouble as other men,
Nor are they plagued like mankind.

He goes on to describe how they think whatever they want, they say whatever they want, and they do whatever they want.

6 Therefore pride is their necklace;
The garment of violence covers them.
7 Their eye bulges from fatness;
The imaginations of their heart run riot.
8 They mock and wickedly speak of oppression;
They speak from on high.
9 They have set their mouth against the heavens,
And their tongue parades through the earth.

They are prideful and violent without consequence. They even mock God and get away with it!

10 Therefore his people return to this place,
And waters of abundance are drunk by them.
11 They say, "How does God know?
And is there knowledge with the Most High?"

Asaph summarizes his point in verse 12:

12 Behold, these are the wicked;
And always at ease, they have increased in wealth.

By contrast, Asaph looks at his own devotion to God and concludes:

13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure
And washed my hands in innocence;
14 For I have been stricken all day long
And chastened every morning.

It looked like there was really no benefit in keeping his heart pure and in being innocent (as opposed to guilty of sin/violence). Asaph felt like all his seeking of God had been rewarded with hardship and discipline. Asaph had reason to be disappointed with God. Scriptures such as Psalm 1 boldly declared that the person who delights in the law of the Lord would be "like a tree firmly planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither, and in whatever he does, he prospers." Seeking God was supposed to bear fruit. If the wicked are prosperous, getting away with murder, and able to carry out every wild idea that come to their minds without consequence, then what's the point of keeping a pure heart?

Not seeing that fruit, Asaph was being lured toward a lifestyle of indulgence and sin. Who among us hasn't felt that lure? There's a reason why even the Bible speaks of "the passing pleasures of sin": most sins (for a time at least) are very pleasurable. Have you ever felt that lure? Are there sins you'd commit in a heartbeat if you knew you wouldn't get caught and if you knew there wouldn't be serious consequences? Do you ever look around at people who indulge every desire and fantasy that comes into their mind and find yourself envious? Do you ever see the sensual lifestyles of people portrayed in the media and think, "I wouldn't mind being him/her for a week. . . ."?

John Owen, the 17th century Puritan scholar, has written very insightfully about the dangers of such thinking:

However strong a castle may be, if a treacherous party resides inside (ready to betray at the first opportunity possible), the castle cannot be kept safe from the enemy. Traitors occupy our own hearts, ready to side with every temptation and to surrender to them all.

. . . temptations and self-interest will dehumanize you. In theory we abhor lustful thoughts, but once temptation enters our heart, all contrary reasonings are overcome and silenced.

(Sin and Temptation, p. 111)

Asaph had a “traitor” in his own heart and we do too. Notice how Asaph dealt with his doubt and temptation. He brought his thoughts into the presence of God.

15 If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.

Asaph had a sense that if he had spoken what he was thinking he would have – in effect – betrayed the people of God. He would have unburdened his mind and heart, but he would have done so at the expense of discouraging others from seeking God. There’s a time and a place for talking about doubts and unbelief, but Asaph was in a position of leadership that would have lead others astray.

What do you do when your heart is being lured away from God, when everything within you wants to indulge sinful passions? You do what Asaph did. You take those sinful passions and those temptations into the very presence of God.

16 When I pondered to understand this,
It was troublesome in my sight
17 Until I came into the sanctuary of God;
Then I perceived their end.

When Asaph finally came into the sanctuary – into the presence of God – he perceived the true condition of the wicked. Things look so very different in the presence of God. Here’s what Asaph perceived about the ungodly when he was in the presence of God:

18 Surely You set them in slippery places;
You cast them down to destruction.
19 How they are destroyed in a moment!
They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!
20 Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused,
You will despise their form.

They weren’t in such an enviable place after all. They were in a very dangerous place. Being at odds with the person and ways of God is a very dangerous condition. The Bible is full of examples of people who went from a position of apparent security and power and luxury to destruction: King Saul, Goliath, Ahab, Nebuchadnezzar, Herod, etc. Subsequent history confirms that to mock the one, true, living God is to court disaster. Psalm 32:10 tells us that “many are the sorrows of the wicked.” That statement is eminently verifiable.

In verses 21 and 22 Asaph reflects upon his condition when he was jealous of the wicked.

21 When my heart was embittered
And I was pierced within,

22 Then I was senseless and ignorant;
I was like a beast before You.

This is so very true to life. When we are captured by some temptation or sin, logic goes out the window; we don't think straight. We do senseless, destructive things. We become like beasts who live to satisfy their raw passions. Look at the contrast in verse 23 and 24:

23 Nevertheless I am continually with You;
You have taken hold of my right hand.
24 With Your counsel You will guide me,
And afterward receive me to glory.

Imagine having the depth of conviction whereby you could say what Asaph said in verses 25 and 26:

25 Whom have I in heaven but You?
And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.
26 My flesh and my heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

This was a real change of heart for Asaph. He went from being envious of the wicked (wanting what they had and doing what they did) to saying, "Besides You, God, I desire nothing on earth." Imagine coming to the place where you find that much satisfaction in God.

27 For, behold, those who are far from You will perish;
You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You.
28 But as for me, the nearness of God is my good;
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,
That I may tell of all Your works.

This conviction is light years away from where Asaph was when he was envious of the wicked. He now understood that there is no safer, more blessed place to be than in the presence of God. "The nearness of God is my good."

There is a core biblical term that describes Asaph's settled conviction that those who love the nearness of God are safe and that those who could care less what God think are in a very dangerous place. That term is ***the fear of the Lord***. When you "fear God" you are intensely concerned about aligning your life with God and His ways. When you fear God, you love what God loves and you hate what God hates. When you fear the Lord you realize it's a very dangerous thing to be at odds with God and His ways. Asaph came to these convictions. And so we can say that Asaph cultivated "the fear of the Lord" in his life.

The Challenge to Cultivate the Fear of the Lord: Proverbs

Many different Scriptures advocate the fear of the Lord as a foundational conviction. There is a special concentration of such Scriptures in the book of Proverbs. For example, Proverbs 1:7 says:

7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

This proverb is clueing us into a very significant truth. This proverb explains how a person can read the Bible and listen to sermons year after year and remain unchanged. This proverb explains one reason why many people get bored with the Bible and with church. It's because they don't have the "fear of the Lord." The fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of knowledge (9:10 – "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."). The word translated "beginning" is *rosh* and is the common word for "head"; the Jewish new year is Rosh Hashanah – literally "the head of the year." In saying that the fear of the Lord is the "head" of wisdom/knowledge, the book of Proverbs is saying that the fear of the Lord is the first, essential thing a person must have to grow in wisdom and knowledge.

If you aren't intensely concerned about aligning your life with God and His ways, if you don't fear the consequences of being at odds with God, you won't progress in wisdom and knowledge. You can read a chapter of Proverbs every single day – the whole book of Proverbs every single month, twelve times a year – and you won't make any progress; it will merely be words on the page. Without this foundational fear of the Lord it just won't make any difference.

In *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard gives some helpful clarification on how foundational the fear of the Lord.

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.

(Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, p. 51)

When Asaph was "senseless and ignorant, like a beast" before God, he was envious of the wicked. But when he saw things clearly he recognized that his well-being was dependent upon "being in harmony with God." He saw how dangerous it was to do anything else. This fear of the Lord was the beginning of Asaph's wisdom and knowledge.

Proverbs 8:13 says:

13 "The fear of the LORD is to hate evil;
Pride and arrogance and the evil way,
And the perverted mouth, I hate.

If you fear the Lord, you will hate what God hates. Proverbs 14:26-27 reads:

26 In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence,
And his children will have refuge.
27 The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life,

That one may avoid the snares of death.

If you fear the Lord, you will experience life and you will avoid all sorts of dangers and heartache.

The concept of the “fear of the Lord” isn’t a comprehensive category for followers of Christ. In other words, there is more to a relationship with God than “the fear of the Lord.” For example, we are supposed to “love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.” “Loving God” isn’t really an aspect of the fear of the Lord; fearing God and loving God are certainly compatible, but they aren’t synonymous. I say in case you’re afraid that the fear of the Lord is a harsh or negative way to think about your relationship with God. It has to be seen in the context of everything else we know about our relationship with God. We do more than “fear God” but we certainly shouldn’t do less.

My challenge and invitation to each of you today is to make a commitment to cultivating the fear of the Lord in your own life. We’re probably in a lot of different places when it comes to the fear of the Lord. The encouraging thing from Scripture is that the fear of the Lord isn’t something that you either have or you don’t; it’s not like having blue eyes. You can cultivate the fear of the Lord; you can learn to fear the Lord (Deut. 14:23). That’s one of the most valuable reasons to study the book of Proverbs; it argues convincingly that aligning yourself with God is wise and doing the opposite is foolish. This is true whether you’re talking about sexuality or words or money or friendships or wine or how you treat your neighbors. (I.e., Proverbs explains how you “fear God” when it comes to the words we speak.) We’re going to study Proverbs with a view toward cultivating the fear of the Lord in our midst.

“God, please give me ‘the fear of the Lord,’” may seem like a dangerous thing to pray. But what we’ve seen is that it’s much *more* dangerous not fearing God.