

THE FEAR OF GOD

STRONG SOULS (3)



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

The Fear of God

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Strong Souls (3)
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The Fear of God

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Welcome to *The Fear of God*

We don't hear much about fearing God these days.

Yet God commands it. It's the beginning of wisdom. The fear of God unites and properly focuses all the affections of the heart.

No soul can grow strong that is not firmly grounded in the fear of God.

But what is the fear of God? Why should we fear Him? And how can we know when we do? These are among the issues we will be considering in this second installment on the heart in our series, "Strong Souls."

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 A God to Be Feared

*You, Yourself, are to be feared;
And who may stand in Your presence
When once You are angry? Psalm 76.7*

*Teach me Your way, O LORD;
I will walk in Your truth;
Unite my heart to fear Your name. Psalm 86.11*

“But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!” Luke 12.5

Fear? Really?

A strong soul requires a heart diligently kept for loving God and neighbor. To keep our heart with all diligence, we must understand the affections which are generated there, and direct our affections toward becoming more like Jesus. Affections are those dispositions of the heart that incline us either toward or away from something. They include our feelings, aspirations, and desires; and unless we are diligent in understanding, nurturing, and engaging these, we may become controlled by cold indifference, mere sentiment, or affections which have gone awry.

In understanding the affections, we must begin where Scripture does; and Scripture begins its teaching about the heart and its affections by calling us to love God with *all* our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Matt. 22.37). This is the first and greatest commandment. Every Christian knows this, and effective discipleship involves cultivating that frame of mind and disposition of heart which lead to loving obedience to God through Jesus Christ.

But the same God Who commands our love also commands us to fear Him, indeed, to fear Him *first* of all, even before we love Him: “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul...” (Deut. 10.12). The order of this instruction is important, and implies that we can neither follow the Lord, nor love and serve Him, unless we *fear* Him first.

Fear is one of the affections that inclines us to *turn away* from someone or something. So strong is the affection of fear that we may be inclined to *flee* or *hide* or otherwise *conceal ourselves* from that which we fear. In fearing God, we turn away from His radiant and glorious face, like John on Patmos (Rev. 1.12-17). We seek to avoid the threats and chastening He can bring upon us when we stray from Him (Heb. 12.3-11). Fearing God leads us to hate sin, flee to Jesus, and rest in the judgment He has accomplished for us. Thus the fear of God keeps us nestled right where He intends. We fear Him rightly; but we are not afraid that He will condemn us, because we rest in Jesus and His salvation (Rev. 1.17, 18; Rom. 8.1).

Since all affections, including fear, have a valid role in the life of faith, we need to make sure our fear is properly focused and intensified. And that can only be the case when we fear neither men nor circumstances, but God only (Lk. 12.4).

We don't hear much about fearing the Lord these days. In fact, about the last thing many pastors seem to want to tell their people is that they should in any way relate to God out of fear. God is our Father, Jesus is our Friend and Brother, and the Holy Spirit is our Comforter. What's to fear there?

Why fear?

As a result, most believers do *not* fear the Lord, and, frankly, their lifestyles demonstrate as much. If we feared the Lord, we would be mindful of offending or disappointing Him, or in any way provoking Him to exercise discipline against us (cf. Ps. 76.7). When the only affection we nurture toward God is love, we aren't likely to obey Him as we should or serve Him as well as we might (Jn. 14.15). And when we fail in obeying and serving God, we miss out on the full and abundant life He wants us to enjoy.

But why should believers fear God? We will examine this question more fully a bit later in this series. For now, as we have seen, we are *commanded* to fear Him; but we should also consider the very nature of the Deity. As Asaph points out in Psalm 76, God is powerful to overcome all adversaries (v. 3); majestic beyond all description (v. 4); wrathful toward those who oppose Him (vv. 5, 6; cf. Rom. 1.18-20); and able to subdue and punish those who arouse His anger (vv. 7-9). As our loving heavenly Father, it pleases God to discipline His children from time to time, and, since no discipline is ever pleasant, we should regard the very *prospect* of discipline with a certain amount of fear.

If we do not *fear* the Lord and His discipline, then we will be less inclined to hate those behaviors that provoke God's discipline against us. We won't hate sin as we should, nor love God or our neighbors as we are commanded.

More than awe

This fear is more than simple awe, although it includes that. The fear of God is a healthy dread of what so powerful, majestic, and holy a God can do to discipline recalcitrant sinners such as we. But besides God commanding us to fear Him, and in addition to His worthiness to be feared, there are the many *benefits* that accrue to those who nurture and sustain a healthy fear of God. Nurturing the fear of the Lord opens wide doors of opportunity to enjoy full and abundant life in ways that, *apart* from the fear of the Lord, we can never fully know. For example, we are commanded to live like wise people and not fools (Eph. 5.15-17), and the beginning of wisdom is to fear the Lord (Ps. 111.10).

To be sure, in fearing God we do not leave off loving Him. By some mystery of grace and the power of the indwelling Spirit, these two affections – fear and love – serve to keep our heart in balance and hold it on an even keel. All the affections of the heart unite with transforming power in the fear of God. In the fear of God, our affections are shaped, focused, improved, and engaged as God intends; and they come to healthy expression from that primary source (cf. Ps. 86.11). The fear of God is the only proper ground for increasing in holiness, as Paul reminds us (2 Cor. 7.1). Our love for God can only grow as we nurture fear of Him, because the enormity of His everyday grace becomes even more starkly evident against the backdrop of our own unworthiness, and of what we deserve at the hands of our holy and just God.

You will only truly love God if you fear Him first; for as we shall see, these two seemingly opposite affections create a healthy tension in the soul to strengthen and focus it, so that righteousness and abundant life can flourish.

For reflection

1. What feelings do you experience when you think of *fear*? Can you see how such feelings are appropriate toward God?
2. We fear God, but we do *not* fear His condemnation. Why not (Rom. 8.1)? Why is this not a contradiction?
3. If we only *love* God, but do not *fear* Him, our obedience and service to Him will be neither consistent nor complete. Explain.

Next steps – Preparation: Review this article in prayer. Do you fear the Lord? How might the fear of God begin to be a more constant and fruitful affection in your heart?

2 The Pleasure of the Lord

*The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear Him,
In those who hope in His mercy.* Psalm 147.11

Nothing to fear?

Strong souls begin in well-kept hearts, where the affections God has placed there are rightly developed and employed together with the mind and the conscience to animate and guide us for Kingdom living.

First among the affections to be attended to is the fear of God. All wisdom, which is faith in practice, begins here. We fear God because He requires it, Jesus commanded it, and Paul wrote that it is the proper ground for increasing in holiness.

We do not need to fear fearing God. In the fear of God, all our affections are properly united to strengthen our soul for serving the Lord (Ps. 86.11). Fear is an altogether appropriate and useful affection. We could argue, in fact, that fear is the most fundamental of all affections, for when all the affections of our hearts are united in fearing *God*, then we will love, obey, serve, and increase in Him as He intends (Deut. 10.12, 13).

Fear is a powerful affection, and when it is inappropriately focused, it can rob us of the joy of following Jesus. If we fear the wrong things – people, what others might think, suffering, loss, etc. – we will lose sight of Jesus Who has overcome everything that might threaten us (Jn. 16.33). There is no reason, Jesus insisted, for any of His followers to fear anything here on earth.

At the same time, as we have seen, Jesus clearly and unequivocally commanded His disciples to fear God. What Jesus understood is what the psalmist also knew, that God “takes pleasure” in His people who fear Him as they should; and, as we have seen, that fear is based on God’s awesome holiness, justice, power, and might. The Hebrew in our text says, literally, that *God pleasures those who fear Him*, suggesting clearly that God is in the midst of those who fear Him as they should, and brings them into the pleasure of His Presence (Ps. 16.11). The pleasure of God is always wholesome, edifying, infectious, and joyful; and this is where God wants us to live.

So if you want to know the pleasure of the Lord, as He pleasures in your midst, fear Him, as Jesus commanded.

Fear and love in tension

The psalmist clearly declares that, where God is concerned, fear and love (mercy, NKJV) are two sides of the same coin; however, it leaves us wondering: How can this be so? Why should it please God for us to fear Him? Wouldn’t God much prefer that we be motivated toward Him out of love, rather than fear?

But this would be to make a typical, foolish human mistake, rather like Eve, contemplating the forbidden fruit and thinking, “Surely God would not withhold this beautiful fruit from us?” – though He had plainly warned them against eating that fruit. Just so, even in the face of God’s express command to love Him, we think to ourselves, “God would want me to love Him, not fear Him. Fear bad; love good.”

In our minds, we struggle to hold fear and love in tension as opposing but harmonizing affections. We think it’s got to be one or the other, and, since none of us likes to live in fear, because we consider fear to be a negative affection, we opt to relate to God by love only, and leave fear out of the equation.

But that just shows our finitude and folly. God knows that, for us to relate to Him *properly*, that is, so that we

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may know full and abundant life, and the *pleasure* He has prepared for us, we must both fear and love Him. Never mind if we can't figure that out, or if it doesn't seem reasonable. God knows what He's doing, and He does what brings us into His pleasure. What does God require of us? First, that we should fear Him.

Fear defined

But note also how the “fear of God” is defined in our psalm.

The psalmist uses a form of parallelism here, in which he states something once, then restates it in a different form to further clarify his meaning. In this case, the first declaration concerns those who fear God; the second, those who hope in His steadfast love. They *fear the Lord* who *hope in His mercy*, or, *His steadfast love* Hebrew: *יִרְאֵהוּ, chasdu*, “His steadfast love”). We fear God as we ought when all our hope in life is focused on the *love* of God that we long to know more fully in the future than ever we have known it in the past. Apart from God's love for us, we cannot so much as even exist! It is by His steadfast and faithful love that God gives us all good things, including life, salvation, and the many and diverse blessings which constitute and sustain our daily lives. As we long to know more of that love, we are fearing God as He intends.

Many people live in fear of having the good things of their lives taken away. The reason they fear losing their comforts, health, safety, and so forth is because they do not fear God – do not hold Him in reverent awe and dread, united with love – and they have allowed the things they love to become idols in place of God. If they truly understood that every good and perfect gift – every single one – comes to us from our loving God and heavenly Father (Jms. 1.17), they would *hope* that His steadfast love would continue, and *fear* Him Who, should He choose to act *only in justice* toward us, rather than with *mercy and grace*, would not only withhold all future blessings, but all life and existence as well.

In this we can see the close connection between fear and love. To fear God is to hope in His love; to know His love is to enter His pleasure where our love for Him increases. To fear and love God, and thus to abide in His pleasure, inclines us to walk in all His holy and righteous and good ways. If we do not *fear* the Lord, it is certain that we will not be able to sustain sufficient love for Him to obey Him.

If we do not *fear* the Lord, we may take His future blessings for granted. How does it make you feel when someone takes your goodness and kindness for granted? Does it make you want to extend even more of those good things to them?

But if we both fear *and* love God, then we will rejoice in the anticipation of His future blessings, we will walk with spiritual power and blessings in the path of righteousness – and we will know the pleasure of our Father Who is in heaven, and Who makes His Presence known among us.

For reflection

1. What is the pleasure of the Lord? How do you experience the Lord's pleasure? Is this a good thing?
2. Do you understand that we deserve *nothing* from God except justice, condemnation, and wrath? Do you hope that, in His mercy, God will spare you from this? Why should He? Should *knowing* that He will not condemn you keep you from *hoping* for His mercy? Explain.
3. If fearing God is a way of expressing our hope for His ongoing mercy, as well as of bringing us into His pleasure, would *learning to fear God* be a good idea, and an important key to keeping your heart with all diligence? Explain.

Next steps – Transformation: Spend some time meditating on all the ways God shows His steadfast love and faithfulness to you throughout the day. What would your life be like without all these benefits? We do not deserve any of the good things that come our way. They are ours by the grace and mercy of God alone. We fear God when we hope in the continuation of His steadfast and faithful love. Express your fear and love for God in a prayer of praise and thanksgiving.

3 Delighting in God's Law

Praise the LORD!

*Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,
Who delights greatly in His commandments.* Psalm 112.1

Who fears the Lord?

Because God is the gracious and faithful Provider of all our needs, and because apart from His steadfast love and mercy we would not even exist, we fear Him, for we know that we do not deserve any of His largesse, but only His wrath. Fearing Him we show that we are grateful for His bounty and confident in His steadfast love, that He will not remove these from us. We give thanks for His goodness and humbly beseech His continuing favor and blessings. Fearing Him, far from leaving us withdrawn from and cowering before the Lord, finds us smack in His very Presence, participating in the pleasure with which He takes pleasure in us.

It seems incongruous, I know. And this is as it should be. For fearing God and so knowing His pleasure is a great mystery. They are relating properly to God who, having come through faith in Jesus Christ to know the Father, understanding that they have been delivered from His eternal wrath and are daily lavished with His undeserved blessings, now live in love for and fear of Him.

What characterizes such people? That is, how can we know those who love and fear the Lord? And how can they maintain this right focus and intensity of *fear* as the starting-point for a heart that engages all the affections as God intends?

More to the point, how can we be sure that *we* love and fear the Lord?

The psalmist offers this additional insight: they fear the Lord who delight in His commandments. The reference here is clearly to the Law of God – the Ten Commandments and the statutes, precepts, and rules which guide us in the blameless life of love for God and our neighbors (Lk. 1.6; Matt. 22.34-30). Paul insists that the Law of God is holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7.12), and it is appropriate for those who delight in the God Who gave such laws to delight in His Law as well. Delighting greatly in God's Law brings us more fully into the knowledge of God – His holiness, justice, and mercy – and thus provides us with ample reasons both to fear and love Him.

Delighting in God's Law

But what does it mean to delight in the Law of God? We should note that the word *delights* is, in the Hebrew, a participle, and thus intends to describe the *character* of a person, rather than something he or she might do on occasion. So one who *delights* in God's Law does so at all times, in every situation, and not simply as a religious exercise appropriate, let's say, to corporate worship or private devotions.

How can we thus delight in God's Law and demonstrate that we fear Him and delight in Him?

Well, in the first place, we cannot delight in what we do not know. From time to time, Susie and I have enjoyed a wonderful dinner of rice, black-eyed peas, and chicken livers, swathed in bacon. Prior to marrying Susie, I would never have thought that such food could delight my palate so richly. I remember, as a child, seeing my mother and grandmother enjoy a lunch of liver, onions, and bacon from time to time. And I recall vowing that I could never eat such horrid smelling food. It took marrying Susie for me to learn otherwise, and to take delight in this and many other foods – except, of course, eggplant – which I would otherwise never have known.

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If we would delight in the Law, therefore, we must *first come to know it*. And if you are married to the Lord through the grace of His Son, you'll receive what He sets before you for the nourishment of your soul, and will find it to be not the onerous burden you suppose, but a means to growing in the fear and love of God.

For many believers, this will be a new experience – like sitting down to chicken livers for the first time. In the contemporary Church, we have become persuaded that the Law of God is not for us. We're “under grace” rather than “under the Law.” We fear that keeping the Law might turn us into legalists or detract from the gracious salvation we know through Jesus Christ.

But once you begin to read, study, and meditate on the Law of God, you will discover such clear guidance in loving God and neighbors, such profound wisdom and beauty, and such a wealth of common-sense instruction on maintaining a just and orderly society, that you will not be able to help yourself.

As you develop a taste for God's Law your delight in it will grow. And as your delight grows, you will show that you fear the Lord as He intends. God has told us in His Law that He will discipline us when we ignore, transgress, or otherwise disobey His Law. And we know that would not be a pleasant experience (Heb.12.3-11). And given that the Law is so holy and righteous and good, we delight to obey it, and thus demonstrate that we fear God even as we delight in Him.

The righteous person delights to meditate in God's Law, day and night (Ps. 1), and he finds no contradiction whatsoever in the salvation which we *receive* by grace through faith and the salvation which we *unpack* through obedience to the gracious Law of God. It is the great burden of the Spirit of God, Who dwells within us, to bring us into the fear of God by teaching us His Law and enabling us to keep it (Ezek. 36.26, 27; Rom. 8.5-8; Phil. 2.13).

Doing the Law

But it doesn't stop in merely reading and meditating on the Law.

As we begin to delight in studying the Law of God, we will delight even more in obeying it. We will learn to say with the psalmist, “Oh how I love Your law!” (Ps. 119.97) and the Law will become such a source of joy to us that we will hasten to add, “I delight to do your will, O my God” (Ps. 40.8). In *doing* the Law of God, we walk in the paths of love for God and neighbor that mark out the course of divine grace as it flows through us. Rivers of living water will issue from our words and deeds as the Spirit of God fills, teaches, and empowers us to obey the Law of God (Ezek. 36.26, 27; Jn. 7.37-39). We will discover depths of transforming grace and power that we have never known before as we work out our salvation in fear and trembling by submitting to the work of God's Spirit as He teaches us His Law (Phil. 2.12, 13).

They who will not delight in and walk in the Law of God show that they neither fear nor love the Lord Who saved them for this purpose (Eph. 2.10).

The Law of God is not a burden to be grudgingly learned and obeyed. Instead, it marks the course of full and abundant life to all who delight in it (Lev. 8.1-5). They who fear the Lord will nurture and manifest that fear by delighting in His Law. Loving God and fearing Him thus go hand in hand, through the joyful, consistent, increasing study and practice of the holy and righteous and good Law of God.

For reflection

1. How would you describe your attitude toward and familiarity with the Law of God? On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 = Greatly Delight, and 1 = I'm not sure, what number would you assign yourself? Why?
2. What could you do, starting today, to begin delighting in the Law of God, so that the Spirit can work within you to will and do of God's good pleasure?

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3. We do not keep the Law *in order to be saved*, but *because we are saved*. Explain.

Next steps: Look up all the passages cited in today's article. Taking them all together, write a brief description of what you think your attitude should be toward the Law of God. Seek the Lord in prayer to guide you more fully into that attitude, and to strengthen your soul for fearing the Lord.

4 Hating Sin

An oracle within my heart concerning the transgression of the wicked:

There is *no fear of God before his eyes*. Psalm 36.1

The wicked and the righteous

It is characteristic of wicked people that they do not fear God. They do not delight in His Law, and they do not look longingly for His faithful and steadfast love. As David continues to say in Psalm 36, the wicked delight in the very things God warns against, and for which He threatens judgment and wrath.

The wicked “flatters himself in his own eyes” concerning his sins, because he thinks he’s getting away with something deliciously evil and fun (v. 2). His words and acts are devoid of peace, truth, wisdom, and goodness because he does not fear the Lord (v. 3). He plots his life along a course of wickedness, setting himself in a way that is not good and that embraces all kinds of evil (v. 4).

These are the wicked, so marked and identified by their repudiation of God and His ways.

All who neglect the Law of God will soon enough excuse themselves from so doing. That neglect and self-justification, which is abominable in the eyes of God (Prov. 28.9), is the breeding-ground for disobedience to God’s Law, even on the part of those who claim to be sons and daughters of God and followers of Jesus Christ. It is characteristic of wicked people to hate God’s Law; it is characteristic of God’s people to *love* His Law and *hate* wickedness.

Those who love the Lord also fear Him, by a divine and spiritual mystery and power, holding those two affections in harmonious tension as the perfect spiritual soil from which righteousness and good works grow. And all who thus love and fear the Lord hate evil in all its forms (Ps. 97.10).

Hate?

We seem to be getting off on something of a negative note in our effort to understand and make the best use of our affections. First, *fear*, and now, *hate*.

As we have seen, hate is a legitimate affection. We should not hate the idea of hating; rather, we should understand hate and its proper use, and channel our hate accordingly.

We don’t much like that word, “hate.” But it is a perfectly legitimate affection and should be cultivated by every sincere follower of Jesus Christ. We must make certain, however, that this powerful repelling affection is properly focused. We are called to hate evil – anything which is contrary to God’s holiness, righteousness, and goodness. And we must sincerely *hate* it – not just be averse to it – so that we cannot bear the very thought of transgressing against the God Who so graciously has saved us in Jesus Christ.

When we hate evil, we will not even so much as dabble in it, because we fear God and His discipline if we should (Heb. 12.3-11). If we dabble in sin in any way – in any of our thoughts, words, or deeds – soon enough we will begin to think that, since no one else knows about it, and it’s not really hurting anyone, a little sin can’t be a bad thing.

But sin is like a cancer. One sin leads to another, as Asaph explained (Ps. 73.18); and sin, like truth, will out, sooner or later. We are not clever enough to be always on guard against the sin we have chosen to harbor in our souls. It will break to the surface in some word or deed when we’re not paying attention, and leave us looking foolish and ashamed. Indeed, we cannot even predict how our cherished peccadillo might spread to some other area of our lives, bringing its corruption to otherwise clean and wholesome activities.

Moreover, they who *harbor* sin rather than *hate* it will find that their prayers are impeded (Ps. 66.18; Is. 59.1, 2). Not only will God turn a deaf ear to our prayers, but we will delight to seek the Lord in prayer less and less, knowing, as we do, that we're harboring an attitude or practice displeasing to Him, and concerning which He knows full well. Like Adam, skulking about in the garden, we'll find every "good" reason to avoid being in the Presence of God and hearing His voice.

We must positively nurture a genuine *loathing* for all things sinful. Sin is what put Jesus on the cross. Sin caused Him infinite sorrow, suffering, and shame. Sin turned the Father's eyes from His Son and left Him to suffer in utter and complete isolation. Should we not truly hate that which brought such incomparable misery to our beloved Savior, and which provokes the wrath of God against unrepentant sinners?

Indeed, we must.

Hate what God hates

If we love and fear the Lord, we will hate that which He Himself hates. And God hates sin. Period.

As we take up the study of God's Law, specific sins will be revealed to us (Rom. 7.7). This is one of the important functions of the Law. The more we delight in the Law, the more we will understand and recognize sin, in ourselves and others; and then we can begin to nurture such a disgust for sin that we will in no way take them into or abide them within our souls or lives.

At the same time, as we begin to hate sin, we will find that we are gaining and practicing more of the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16; Rom. 8.5-9). To fear the Lord is to love what our heavenly Father loves, hate what He hates, and do what brings us into His pleasure. You can know those who fear the Lord, and who are thus on the path to true wisdom, by the degree to which they long for His lovingkindness, delight in His Law, and hate the things He hates.

You who love and fear the Lord, hate evil.

For reflection

1. Hate, like fear, is an affection that *repulses*. Explain.
2. How can becoming increasingly familiar with the Law of God help us to hate sin?
3. If we do nothing actively to hate sin, do you think it's likely we will hate it? Explain.

Next steps – Preparation: Would you describe yourself as "hating sin"? Would your life be different in any ways if you truly hated sin? In what ways? Talk with the Lord in prayer about these questions.

5 Courageous Faith

But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" So he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." Genesis 22.11, 12

How does God know?

How does God know if we truly fear Him? Put another way, what can we *do* that will enable us to express our fear of God, so that we enter His pleasure as He intends?

After all, God commands us to fear Him. He knows that when we fear Him, we will delight in His Law and hate all manner of evil. They who live thus before the Lord are positioning themselves to enter His pleasure. But they are also setting their hearts for acts of *courageous obedience*, which only true faith can engender.

When we live by such faith, obeying God even when what He requires of us seems unlikely, fearful, unreasonable, or beyond anything we've ever experienced, then we prove to Him that we love and fear Him as we ought.

And He sees, and He knows that we fear Him.

This is what God saw in Abraham, and this is what He is looking for in us, so that we might know His pleasure in seeing that we fear Him as we should.

Abraham's task

Abraham's was neither a pleasant nor, from a human perspective, a reasonable task. He loved his only son, Isaac. The thought of sacrificing him on an altar on the top of the mountain must have sent horror and disgust into his very bones.

Moreover, this was the child of promise, the one through whom God declared He would make of Abraham a great nation. How could it be *reasonable* to sacrifice this child?

In our daily lives with the Lord, we may be confronted with prompts, suggestions, or the coaxing of the Lord to do things that appear to us as neither pleasant nor reasonable. Get up earlier to spend more time in the Word and prayer. Tell the Good News of Jesus to that angry colleague at work. Forgive this one who has so egregiously sinned against you. Confront a sinning believer with the wickedness of His ways. Heed the call to serve the poor and needy at the local rescue mission. Stop robbing the Lord by withholding the tithe from Him. Confess that secret sin which you have been harboring against your spouse. And so on.

But we can be confident that God will never command us to do anything contrary to His Law or what is not in our best interest.

In our souls, we have managed to suppress such acts of obedience, because we find them unpleasant, risky, or inconvenient. But the Lord continues to poke, prod, and pique us to take the step of obedient faith and do the thing we hate or fear, to show that we fear Him and hate disobeying.

None of the challenges we must confront even approaches what Abraham was called to do, but they may all seem as unpleasant and unreasonable to us as that task which he took up in courageous faith.

Simple obedience

But when we love the Lord, we will want to please Him by doing whatever He clearly shows us to do. And

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when we fear the Lord, we will do what He bids, to avoid His discipline against our hardness of heart. How can we muster the kind of courageous faith that shows the Lord that we love and fear Him as we ought?

First, we must be certain about what the Lord is calling us to do. Don't act impulsively. Listen in prayer and wait upon the Lord to restate and reinforce His directive, as the Spirit prompts and leads you day by day. Make sure, by delighting in God's Law and meditating in it day by day (Ps. 1), that you have a good grasp of what God requires of us in loving Him and our neighbor. Map out your day, and prepare for the opportunities that may present themselves for living courageous faith.

Second, envision yourself performing the thing you dread, and then make preparation to carry out your obedience in faith. Abraham knew what a sacrifice required – fire, wood, a sharp knife – and he made sure to bring these with him to the mountain. Whatever God is calling us to do, we must see ourselves acting in obedience and make whatever preparations of prayer, setting up a meeting, writing down what we want to say, or whatever else may be involved, so that when the moment for courageous obedience presents itself, we will be ready.

But, finally we must trust in the Lord to do what He intends to do in this situation. God is good; He does all things well; He works all things together for good to those who love Him and are following His purposes; and He never fails nor forsakes us. It may be that we can only envision more sorrow, inconvenience, or worse from doing what we perceive the Lord is prompting us to do. If we have waited on Him faithfully, envisioned ourselves acting, and made the necessary preparations, then, at the earliest moment or opportunity, we must take by faith the steps our obedience requires. We must leave the results of our obedience in the hands of God, giving Him thanks and praise for whatever the outcome may be.

They who act in such courageous faith show the Lord that they fear Him. And He will surely grant them the blessing of His pleasure as a result.

For reflection

1. Has the Lord ever nagged you about some situation or action you should take? How did you respond?
2. How do you suppose Abraham felt as he was walking up that mountain with Isaac? But did he allow *those* affections to override his *fear* of God? How does Abraham's obedience illustrate Psalm 86.11?
3. If we fail to act in courageous obedience to what God is urging us to do, can we expect our hearts to grow more in love with Him, or become more hardened against Him? Explain.

Next steps – Transformation: What act of "courageous faith" came to mind as you were reading this article? What is God calling you to do which will require you to step out of your comfort zone and show Him that you love and fear Him? Make preparations now to take up that act of "courageous faith" at the earliest possible opportunity.

6 Reasons to Fear God

*The fear of the LORD leads to life,
And he who has it will abide in satisfaction;
He will not be visited with evil.* Proverbs 19.23

God's desire for us

Earlier in this study we gave some reasons to fear God relating to Who He is – holy, pure, almighty – and who we are – sinful, self-centered, powerless to save ourselves. These are important reasons for us to learn the fear of God and to live in fear of Him, fear leading to obedience and love.

But there is an even greater reason, fraught with promises of fullness, abundance, and joy; and Solomon points us to it in Proverbs 19.23.

God's desire for His people is that they should know full and abundant life in Jesus Christ (Jn. 10.10; 14.6). This is the good life, life as God intended it, the kind of life in which human beings know their greatest satisfaction and flourish in love. This is the Kingdom life of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit which, once we have made the turn into the Kingdom, must grow and increase in fruitfulness and power (Rom. 14.17, 18; Is. 9.6, 7).

This is why we become Christians, that we might know the abundant life God has prepared for us in Jesus Christ. But if we want this life, truly want to know and enjoy the fullness of life in Christ, we can only achieve it on God's terms. And His terms are clear: they who *fear* God know the life God intends for them and enter the rest He has accomplished for them in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, in the redemption God provides through Him, we find fullness of life and joy (Ps. 16.11) as we fear and love the Lord.

Two promises

Two subsidiary promises help us to understand why this is so.

First, the fear of the Lord leads to *knowledge of the truth* (Prov. 1.7). The knowledge of truth sets us free from the misery, constraints, power, and consequences of sin which bind and constrain us, preventing us from knowing full and abundant life (Jn. 8.32). When we know the truth and delight in it, we find the guidance and power we need to hate sin and embrace the life of love for God and neighbors that God intends for us. And the way into truth is through the gate of fearing God.

When we fear God, we will love His Word. By hiding the Word of God in our hearts and letting it dwell within us richly, we can discover the newness, wholeness, and righteousness that allow us to enjoy full and abundant life (Ps. 119.9-11).

But unless we learn to fear God, we will not even be able to *begin* gaining the knowledge of truth. This only makes sense. God is the Author of truth, Jesus is the embodiment of it, and the Spirit is the One Who guides us into all truth. Why would God entrust His precious, life-transforming, world-understanding truth to someone who refused to attain it by the means He has appointed?

Your love for Scripture and ability to know the life of freedom it provides will increase in direct proportion to the extent that the fear of the Lord grows alongside your love for Him.

Second, the fear of God is the beginning of *wisdom* (Ps. 111.10), which, as we practice it, gives us good

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understanding into every aspect of human life and leads us to richer, fuller worship of our God. Wisdom is that everyday skill in living that allows us to realize the life of Jesus Christ – Who is the fullness of God’s wisdom (Prov. 8; Col. 2.2, 3). The more we increase in wisdom, the more Jesus increases in us and flows out from us to fill the spaces of our lives with Himself (Jn. 7.37-39; Eph. 4.8-10).

We can ask, “What would Jesus do?” all we want, but we will not be able to live like Him – to live in wisdom – with any degree of consistency until fear of the Lord is firmly in place in our soul.

Wisdom is based on knowledge, which begins with salvation and builds as we study and meditate on God’s Law and all His Word. Knowledge thus gained – through the fear of the Lord – equips us in everyday situations to live like Jesus, in the wisdom of God. Fearing God thus leads to knowledge and wisdom, so that we know the pleasure of God in every aspect of our lives.

It may seem strange or perhaps even unreasonable to think that God requires us to fear Him before He will bring us more fully and abundantly into the life of knowledge, wisdom, and power. But the question is not can we make sense of this; the question is, What has God plainly declared, and what does He require?

The only happy person

As Solomon argued in Ecclesiastes, only the wise person is truly happy. But to be wise, as he pointed out, we must orient the totality of our existence to God, living “under the heavens” rather than “under the sun.” The whole of life, as Solomon summed it up in his exhortations to his son, is to fear God and keep His commandments (Eccl. 12.13). What he literally says is, “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of what it means to be a human being.”

If you are trying to live your Christian life apart from the fear of God, you will never realize all the joy, purpose, power, vision, beauty, goodness, righteousness, hope, love, and peace that God intends for you. You will never know the truth that sets you free, and you will be barred from the treasury of wisdom and knowledge which is in Jesus Christ. Because God has determined that these are available only to those who fear Him.

But work hard to nurture the fear of the Lord, and watch your walk with Jesus, and your joy in following Him, begin to blossom, bloom, and bear fruit, in knowledge, wisdom, and love for God and neighbors.

For reflection

1. Why does it make sense that God would require us to fear Him if we would grow in truth and wisdom?
2. What’s the difference between *truth* and *wisdom*? How are they related?
3. As we grow in truth and wisdom, would you expect this to reinforce fear and love for God? Explain.

Next steps – Transformation: Would you describe yourself as one who earnestly desires to know truth and live in wisdom? What would be the identifying marks of such a person? Are these marks present in your life? Lay out a plan to begin growing in love for God’s truth and desire for His wisdom.

7 This Way to the Fear of God

*Then you will understand the fear of the LORD,
And find the knowledge of God. Proverbs 2.5*

Called to fear God

We have been investigating the much-neglected doctrine of the fear of God. Fear of God is the starting point for rightly ordering all our affections (Ps. 86.11) and keeping our hearts with all diligence. We may not like the idea of fearing God, but God does; and in the end, what God likes and desires is designed to bring us fullness of life in Jesus.

We have seen that God *commands* us to fear Him, and that fear and love, rather than being opposed, create a *harmonic tension* in our soul which leads to the pleasure of God, knowledge, and wisdom; and out of which come righteousness and good works.

When we fear God, we love His Law, and all His Word, and hate everything which is contrary to Him and His purposes (Ps. 97.10).

We have further seen that the fear of God grows where people delight in His Law and hope in His mercy and steadfast love, so that, increasingly, they attain to the knowledge of truth and the wisdom of God, which are found in the treasury of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Can there be any lingering doubt concerning whether the followers of Christ are called to fear God? The concept may still seem strange, even suspect to you; but we must agree, I think, that Scripture and the Lord Jesus Christ plainly instruct us to fear the Lord, even as we love Him.

Nurturing fear of God

But we have also seen that such fear of the Lord must be nurtured. We don't come by it naturally; indeed, we seem to have something of a spiritual aversion to relating to God based on fear. So we will need to learn how to develop this affection and to keep it tightly bound to our love for God as we do.

Solomon's advice to his son in Proverbs 2.1-5 lays out a kind of roadmap, marking out the way to the fear of God.

We can see this in verse 5, the end of the passage, when Solomon says, "*then* you will understand the fear of the LORD..." Then? When? When we have met the conditions set forth in the previous verses. We need to back up to verse 1 and make our way down to verse 5 to discover what is involved in arriving at the fear of God.

So let's have a closer look.

Right this way

First, of course, we must *allow ourselves to be taught*: "My son, if you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you..." (v. 1). The Scriptures clearly teach that God requires us to fear Him, and that for our own good. We have seen this over and over. Gaining the fear of God requires new insights and understandings, together with a whole different way of looking at our relationship with God. So we must submit to Scripture and wise teachers who can counsel and guide us in understanding both why this affection is so necessary and how we may begin to nurture it within our souls. We must receive their teaching eagerly and treasure it whole-heartedly if we want to know this most important affection working in our heart for the proper strengthening of our soul.

As we are being taught, we must listen carefully to *discern wisdom* and *bend our hearts toward understanding*: “...incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding...” (v. 2). This will enable us to *internalize* and *personalize* the teaching we are receiving from God’s Word. We must not study the Scriptures in merely abstract terms, content only to gain new insights or deeper understanding; rather, we want to know *for ourselves* what it means to fear the Lord and how we can begin to attain to this. We want to *acquire* the fear of God and realize its many benefits in our own lives. We want to wrap our heart around the fear of God and have it lodged firmly and unfalteringly there.

At the same time, we must envelop our study and learning in *prayer to God*, crying out to Him to help us understand and gain that fear of Him which He requires (vv. 3, 4). Solomon describes praying in a way that makes obtaining understanding and wisdom the most important thing any of us can do. We must cherish, long for, and seek the acquisition of these precious commodities as the highest priority in our lives, pleading with God day by day to nurture the fear of Him in our souls.

God alone gives the wisdom and knowledge that flow from fearing Him (v. 6), and He will only give these, as we have seen, to those who approach Him out of love and fear for Him, earnest in their desire to increase in all His promised blessings and boon.

And we must persist in prayer as if gaining the fear of God were the most important, most valuable, most precious asset we could acquire (v. 4).

This combination of study, obedience, and prayer is an ongoing, lifelong calling. We must not be reluctant to nurture the fear of God in our heart. This way lies much blessing, even power to enhance our witness for the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5.11). Our duty as followers of Jesus Christ is to set aside every obstacle that stands in our way, and to devote ourselves to bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7.1).

Set yourself a course of study, obedience, and prayer, with the fear of God as your ultimate objective, and see if the Lord doesn’t meet you there, enriching your knowledge of Him and His truth, and clothing you with the wisdom, power, and holiness of Jesus Christ for your everyday life.

The fear of God is the starting-point and end-point for keeping our heart with all diligence. And a strong, well-ordered heart is the foundation and *sine qua non* of a strong soul.

For reflection

1. How has your understanding of and attitude toward the fear of God changed as you have read through these lessons?
2. Would you say that your life is now on course to grow in the fear of God? Can you expect to keep your heart with all diligence if this is *not* the case? Explain.
3. How can you see that fearing God is a *positive* and even *indispensable* affection for you to nurture in your heart?

Next steps – Transformation: Study, prayer, and daily obedience: These are the way to the fear of God. What have you learned about the fear of God from these studies? What steps are you taking to increase in the fear of God and all the blessings that come with that?

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Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What is the fear of God? Why do you suppose we don't hear much about the fear of God in churches these days?
2. How is the fear of God related to loving Him? Why are both essential to discipleship? How does fearing God order all the affections of the heart?
3. How would you explain to a new believer what it means to grow in the fear of God, and why he or she should? How important is fearing God to having a strong soul? Explain.
4. How can Christians help one another gain more of the benefits of fearing God that His Word describes?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study about fearing God? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.