

"Who's Afraid of God?"

I was doing premarital counseling with a young couple planning to get married in the church. Neither was involved at all in the church. I was going over the part of the ceremony where it says, "*It is not to be entered into unadvisedly, but reverently, discreetly, and in the fear of the Lord.*" At that, the young lady said, "I want to change that. I don't think we need to fear God." "I don't think we need to fear God." What about that?

A lot of people would agree. I think it's fair to say that a lot of people today – at least in our culture - shy away from the idea that God should be feared. I mean, "God is kind. God is love. I don't want a religion where we have to be afraid of God."

And yet, throughout the Bible there are numerous passages that say we are to fear God. "Fear of the Lord" seems to be an essential element in biblical faith.

Listen to what Moses says to the people of Israel: "So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being" (Deuteronomy 10:12-13). The writer of Psalm 33 wants *everyone* to fear God: "Let *all the earth* fear the Lord, let *all the inhabitants of the world* stand in awe of Him" (Psalm 33:8). The Book of Ecclesiastes ends with this conclusion: "*Fear God*, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

You may say, "But isn't the Bible just telling us we need to *respect* and *reverence* God? It doesn't mean we should be afraid of God." Well, not exactly! While fearing God does involve showing reverence for God, it also includes elements of awe, dismay, terror, dread! When God appeared to people in the Bible it usually scared them half to death! God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai amidst thunder and lightning and thick clouds, and it says the people below in the camp were afraid and trembled (Exodus 19:16 20:18)! God reveals Himself to Jacob in a dream, and when he wakes up, look at what happens: "He was *afraid*, and said, 'How awesome is this place!'" (Genesis 28:17).

You may say, "Yeah, but these are verses from the *Old Testament*. Hasn't the New Testament replaced the fear of God with the love of God? No. Here are some Scriptures from the *New Testament*: Hebrews 10:31: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Check out this description of the early church: "Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. *Living in the fear of the Lord* and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers" (Acts 9:31). Jesus talked about fearing God: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Jesus is telling His followers not to fear those who may persecute them, or even kill them. Rather, they should fear God, who can destroy both our souls and bodies. *So, fear of God is not only in the Old Testament, but the New Testament too.*

Maybe some of you are feeling uneasy about what I'm saying so far. You're thinking, "I don't know if I want a faith where you have to be afraid of God. A religion of fear is a sick religion."

I get that! And I can agree with you, at least to some degree.

There are religious people and groups who emphasize the fear of God in a way that's unhealthy and perverted. I'm thinking of hellfire and brimstone preachers and evangelists from the past. And churches and Christians today that overemphasize God's wrath and judgment. Also, some individuals have an obsessive fear of God. They always feel that God's ticked off at them and condemning them. This is sick, and is often rooted in a childhood where an earthly father was mean, or they had parents they could never please.

On the other hand, many people today go the opposite extreme, and fashion God into some kind of Big Sugar Daddy, a cosmic Mr. Nice Guy. God loves everyone to bits...is everybody's pal...and just sort of overlooks all the bad things people do.

I believe our generation has lost something of a healthy reverence for God. There was a TV show where people were joking about Easter. Cast members came out in Easter outfits: someone in a bunny suit, then a man in a robe, sandals and long hair depicting Jesus, and joking about Him. An episode of Saturday Night Live had a skit in which Jesus was the object of humor. During the skit, an actor said that since Christ died more than 2000 years ago He hasn't said much lately. Then dropping to his knees to mimic hammering a nail, he added mockingly, "And the last thing he said was 'Aargh!'. Friends, that's not funny. That's sickness to the core!

Since there's a lot of distorted thinking and sentimentality today about the fear of God, let's look further into what Scripture says about this.

Fear of God is essential if we're going to have a relationship with God. We don't come to God on equal terms. This isn't a level playing field. God is holy. We are sinful. God is infinite and immortal; we are finite, and mortal. Most of us wouldn't think of sauntering into the office of the president of Fulton Bank or the CEO of Macy's, unannounced and sitting down for a friendly chit-chat. *We don't do that with God either!*

George W. Bush's wife Laura tells of the time when she and the President visited his parents, the former President and Barbara. George W. woke up at 6 a.m. as usual and went downstairs to get a cup of coffee. As he sat down on the sofa, he put his feet up on the coffee table. All of a sudden his mother Barbara yelled, "Put down your feet!" His father, the older President Bush said, "For goodness' sake, Barbara, he's the President of the United States." Barbara said, "I don't care. I don't want his feet on my table." The President promptly did as he was told! Well, no matter who we are, we don't just put our feet up on God's coffee table! The only proper attitude towards this Holy Other is humility, reverential fear!

Fear of God, and fear of the consequences of a sinful life, can be a legitimate motive for coming to Christ for salvation. Purists may reason, "Well, I don't think we should become a Christian out of fear. No one should turn to Christ because they fear God's wrath or judgment. We should follow Christ because we love Him, and are thankful for what He's done for us."

Ok. Fearing God may not be the *best* motive for trusting Christ for salvation. But it can be *one avenue* we take that leads us to Christ and a new life in Him! Let's suppose we're in a hotel, on the 5th floor, and a fire breaks out. We're trapped. Smoke begins to fill the room. A fireman comes up to our window on one of those big booms or cherry pickers and yells, "Come on out! I'll take you to safety!" Are you going to argue, "Thanks, but my fear of smoke and flames isn't a very good motive to want to be saved! Give me some time to work up more love and appreciation for the fire department and all the good work you do."

Ridiculous, isn't it! Sure, it'd be nice if everyone who trusted Christ as their Savior came to Jesus just because they felt a warm love for Him. But there's nothing wrong with fearing the consequences of our sin. Or fearing God's judgment. Or fearing what will happen if we ignore or reject God's gift of salvation in Christ. Psalm 103:17 says, "The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who *fear him*." God shows His mercy to those who reverence and fear Him.

What about *after* we become a Christian? Should we still fear God then? Yes. God is still holy. We are still sinful.

For instance, there ought to be something of this sense of reverence and fear of the Lord in our worship. I can't help but think many of our worship services lack this sense of reverence and awe of God – the unimaginable glory and holiness of God. A worship service is not a show. It's not a performance. Often we evaluate how effective a worship service is on whether or not it makes us feel good, and gives us a warm feeling! Do I come out of church feeling good? (I doubt that Moses, when he met God on Mount Sinai, felt all warm and fuzzy). The test of whether worship is authentic or not has little to do with whether or not it makes us feel good! The test of true worship is this: Have I given to God the glory due His name? Have I been motivated to offer my whole life to God as a living sacrifice? (Check out Romans 12:1).

This element of fearing God is an essential part of worship, but also the fear of God gives moral value to life and helps keep us on the right path. When I was a child growing up, in some ways I feared my dad. He wasn't mean. He loved my sister and me. But there was just enough respect for him, and fear of him, that helped keep me from doing wrong and stupid things. *Where there is no fear of God, ethics and morality begin to decay*. You may disagree, but I think we're seeing this in today's culture. We are becoming more secular. More people are shunning a religious base for their life. Fewer people believe in a God who judges us and holds us accountable for how we live our life. If people feared God more, they wouldn't do some of the things they do!

But we can't stop here, when we're thinking of whether or not we should be afraid of God. The gospel means "good news." The message of the gospel is not just that we have to be afraid of God and tow the line because of that. That's not "good news" at all, is it? So let's look at 1 John 4:16-18. "So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with

punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." While we always should have a healthy reverence for God and fear of God, we can progress and mature in Christ to the point where we no longer have to be afraid of God or of God's judgment. We have that assurance that God loves us, and in Christ we're forgiven and accepted. As it says in Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus."

This is a message that fits right into the Christmas season! The awesome, holy God of all creation, whose mere presence caused people to tremble and cringe and bow down in fear...this God came into this world *as a baby*. When's the last time you saw a baby, or held a baby, and were afraid of it? More likely, we felt drawn to this little baby. Tenderly connected. "Perfect love casts out fear" – when we experience God's love for us, when we grow in our love for God, any unhealthy fear can go away.

There are so many promises in the Bible to those who fear the Lord! Let me close with just a few.

Psalm 25:14 tells us, "The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him." Fearing God in a healthy way actually helps bring us closer to God.

Proverbs 1:7 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."

Psalm 25:12 "Who are they that fear the Lord? He will teach them the way that they should choose." Humbling ourselves before God and fearing Him allows God to guide us.

Psalm 31:19: "O how abundant is your goodness that you have laid up for those who fear you." God honors those who fear Him, and wants to give us good things.

Isaiah 8:12-13 "Do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread." Life can present with a whole host things to fear and dread. But when we reverence and fear God, this can minimize or eliminate a lot of the other things we are prone to be afraid of. We can trust God to take care of us.

And finally, Proverbs 19:23 reminds us, "The fear of the Lord leads to life." What more can we ask than that!

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