

CHAPTER 3

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

EVERYONE fears something. Some fears are healthy, and some are not. But all fears share this component: what we fear controls us. On one occasion when I was doing a conference in Singapore, my wife's fear of heights kept her from exploring the wonders of a mountain cave in Borneo and saved me several dollars because of her adamant refusal to ride the Singapore Flier, a huge, slow moving Ferris wheel designed to give a bird's eye view of the city. Whether rational or irrational, fear is a powerful and persuasive motivating emotion.

It is not surprising that the Bible is so concerned about what we fear – because what motivates us is so important. So often and in so varied of circumstances, the Lord commands us to stop fearing certain things. That is not always an easy command to obey since it usually concerns scary situations, whether the presence of enemies, storms, trials, or just the face of man. The grip of fear has the power to paralyze. Fear results from the overwhelming awareness of something that we perceive to be threatening. Sight is the mechanism that triggers fear. Not to fear what we would naturally be afraid of requires a conscious ignoring of what we perceive to be the threat. Not fearing what is seen requires a reassessment of what is real. In this biblical context, not fearing is walking by faith rather than sight.

Although the Bible identifies many things not to fear, it isolates one object of legitimate and necessary fear: God. This does not imply that God is 'scary,' but it does demand that the conscious awareness of God should govern life.¹ It is the fear of God that dispels the fear of other things. Thus, David could say that even though he walked through deep darkness (where scary things would lurk), he would not be afraid of the potentially harmful things because of his awareness of God's presence (Ps. 23:4). Being more aware of God, who he could not see with physical

1. 'What then is the fear of the Lord? It is not a cringing dread before the Lord. It is not a guilty "Oh no, here comes God. I'm in for it now." The fear of the Lord is openness to him, eagerness to please him, humility to be instructed by him.... It takes us to that place of maturity where no one has to follow us around with a tedious list of do's and don't's, constantly telling us what to do. We are motivated from deep within. We know what is right, and it is what we love, because it is of God' (Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., *Proverbs: Wisdom that Works* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012], p. 30).

sight, kept him from fearing whatever dangers were lying in wait in the darkness. That is walking by faith and not sight.

The Bible's demand for the fear of God is so all encompassing and all pervasive that it is the very essence of true piety and ultimately defines true religion.² The fear of God is the principle for worship, the directive against sin, the dynamic of spiritual life, and the main spring of Christian service. Simply said, the fear of God governs both worship and ethics, affecting both attitudes and actions. It is not surprising that the fear of God along with obeying God is the sum of man's duty to the Lord (Eccles. 12:13; see also Deut. 10:12). Not only is it the mandated duty, it is the mark of those who live in such a way as to delight the Lord. The Psalmist affirmed, 'The LORD taketh pleasure in them that fear him' (147:11).

Because the fear of God is such an all-pervasive component of true religion, it relates directly to obeying God's call to holiness. In essence, to fear God is to live in the conscious awareness of God as He has revealed Himself in holiness, factoring Him into every situation and circumstance of life. Living in the fear of God is living in the reality of God. Recognizing and acknowledging God for who He is demands the response of fearing Him. Moses clearly made that connection in Deuteronomy 10 where he sets out the requirements of true religion. Deuteronomy 10:17 sums up who God is: 'For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible ...' The expressions God of gods and Lord of lords are Hebrew idioms designating a superlative idea: the Lord is the supreme God and supreme Sovereign. The word 'terrible' is a bit misleading according to modern usage, but literally means 'One who is to be feared, revered or honored.'³ After identifying who God is, Moses issued the imperative: 'Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God; him shalt thou serve, and to him shalt thou cleave, and swear by his name. He is thy praise, and he is thy God ...' (Deut. 10:20, 21). So fearing God with all its attendant circumstances affecting the practice of life begins with the knowledge of God. I can sum it up this way: Fearing God starts in the head with the knowledge of God; it is expressed with the heart through worship; it is evidenced through the hands in holy behavior. The purpose of this chapter is to consider how the fear of God relates to God's call to holiness, but the 'doing' or 'hand' part of fear cannot be understood in isolation. Holy living does not happen with an empty head or an unfeeling heart.

HEAD TO HEART

There is an inseparable link between knowing God and fearing God. Not to fear God equates to ignorance of who He is. Proverbs 1:7 says, 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,' and Proverbs 9:10 says, 'The fear of the LORD is the

2. 'Any sphere of knowledge you're engaged in—every aspect of your workaday world—should be to you as a believer a source of wonder and worship and should be used as a means of glorifying God. And it will be if you enjoy the fear of God' (Jerry Bridges, *The Joy of Fearing God* [Colorado Springs, Colo.: Waterbrook Press, 1997], p. 5).

3. 'A profound sense of awe toward God is undoubtedly the dominant element in the attitude or set of emotions that the Bible calls "the fear of God"' (Bridges, p. 18).

beginning of wisdom.’ Although two different Hebrew words for ‘beginning’ occur in the two statements, they convey essentially the same ideas, denoting fear as both the starting point and chief principle of knowledge and wisdom. Fearing God is the consequence of knowing God and is the core of wisdom. That is significant since Proverbs, as a blueprint for the practice of true religion, sums up that pious practice in terms of wisdom. In Hebrew, the word ‘wisdom’ means ‘skill’ or ‘ability.’ In Proverbs, wisdom designates the skill or ability to live in a way that pleases God. In other words, wisdom is a life of sanctification, a life pursuing holiness. Knowing God leads to the fear of God which in turn generates genuine awe. The fear of God starts in the head and governs the heart. So it is vital to know God.

God is not the figment of imagination. What we know of God, indeed what is knowable about God, is what He has chosen to reveal of Himself, whether through the means of natural or special revelation. It is obviously beyond the scope and purpose of this study to develop an extensive theology proper, that is the doctrine of God. That would require volumes. But the Scripture does give guidance concerning the foci of the revelation of God that should inform our fear-generating knowledge. The Psalmist enjoined in the final inspired model for worship, ‘Praise ye the LORD . . . Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness’ (Ps. 150:1-2). The point very simply is that God deserves to be feared because of who He is, what He is like, and what He does. Fearing God results from attention to God’s august Person, His attractive perfections, and His awesome works.⁴ The more we know about Him, the more we will fear Him.

That fear will manifest itself in genuine spiritual worship. A key component of fearing the Lord is the attitude about Him, an attitude of awe and reverence in the heart. Stephen Charnock comments on the necessary connection between knowing God’s person, perfections, and works and worshipping Him rightly:

When we see, therefore, the frame of the world to be the work of his power, the order of the world to be the fruit of his wisdom, and the usefulness of the world to be the product of His goodness, we find the motives and reasons of worship; and weighing that his power, wisdom, goodness, infinitely transcend any corporeal nature, we find a rule of worship, that it ought to be offered by us in a manner suitable to such a nature as infinitely above any bodily being. His being a Spirit declares what he is; his other perfections declare what kind of Spirit he is . . . How cold and frozen will our devotions be, if we consider not his omniscience, whereby he discerns our heart! How carnal will our services be, if we consider him not as pure Spirit!⁵

Or we can sum it up in terms of Scripture: ‘For thou are great, and doest wondrous things: thou are God alone. Teach me thy way, O LORD; I will walk in thy truth: unite my heart to fear thy name’ (Ps. 86:10-11; see also Pss. 33:8; 89:7).

4. ‘To fear God is to cherish an awesome sense of His greatness, grandeur, and excellence as these perfections are revealed to us both in His Word and His works’ (Bridges, p. 59).

5. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1979), 1:207.

To know God in His Infinite Being and perfections and to consider His works of creation, providence, and redemption stagger the mind. It is always the case that such recognition of the Lord's immensity, majesty, and might heightens the sense of personal smallness. Seeing God always magnifies Him and reduces every sense of self. Consider how both Ezekiel and John could only fall on their faces when overtaken by the glory of God (Ezek. 1:28; Rev. 1:17). A genuine fear of God will express itself in true and reverential worship.⁶ So close is the connection between fearing God and worshipping Him that the terms are interchangeable. Jesus Himself makes the correlation. In response to one of Satan's temptations, Christ said, 'Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve' (Matt. 4:10). As in each of His answers of resistance Christ quoted a text from Deuteronomy, here from 10:20 that says 'Thou shalt fear....' Interestingly, the Septuagint of Deuteronomy 10:20 uses the Greek word for fear; so Christ is giving the divine interpretation of what it means to fear the Lord.

The level of genuine, heartfelt, and heart active worship will always be in proportion to how much we are impressed with the object of worship. True worship, therefore, arises from the knowledge of God. The greater the knowledge of God, the greater will be the exercise of true worship. Worship conducted in the fear of God will always seek to elevate God to His proper place and prevent elevating self. This was the counsel of the Preacher when he instructed, 'Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God ... for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth' (Eccles. 5:1-2). Keeping the foot simply means to guard the steps, to be careful about conduct, to exercise personal restraint. As we become increasingly conscious that worship brings us into the holy presence of God, we must become increasingly cautious that we do nothing to offend that holy presence. We are to worship in the fear of the Lord.

HEAD TO HANDS

Worship with sincere awe and reverence is an essential element of the fear of the Lord, but how fear affects the hands or behavior is the principal concern of this study. The fear of God that starts in the head and governs the heart also dictates the hands. Attitude affects actions. Knowing God and living in the reality of God (fearing Him) leads to practical holiness by putting temptations to sin in proper perspective. It is almost inconceivable that one could submit to temptation if and when, at the moment of temptation, he is factoring the reality of God into the situation.⁷ How can sin be attractive when the reality of God grips and fills the mind? The bottom line is that the fear of the Lord is a motivation for sanctification,

6. 'The fear of God ... is the fear which constrains adoration and love. It is the fear which consists in awe, reverence, honor, and worship.... It is the reflex in our consciousness of the transcendent majesty and holiness of God' (John Murray, *The Fear of God: The Soul of Godliness* [Birmingham, Ala.: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008], p. 12).

7. 'The first thought of the godly man in every circumstance is God's relation to him and it, and his relation to God. That is God-consciousness and that is what the fear of God entails' (Murray, *The Fear of God*, p. 14).

for dying to sin and living to righteousness. Proverbs clearly draws the line between fearing God and avoiding sin. For instance, Proverbs 16:6 says, ‘by the fear of the LORD men depart from evil.’ Similarly, 3:7 says, ‘Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil’ and 8:13 says, ‘The fear of LORD is to hate evil.’ Job illustrates the connection as he was described as a man ‘that feared God, and eschewed evil’ (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3).

Just like worship, this element of fear flows from the knowledge of God, particularly in terms of what is known about His hatred of sin. Knowing the consequences of sin and how sin displeases the Lord should be powerful motivators to resist sin’s temptations. In terms of worship, fearing God is reverential awe. In terms of ethics, fearing God is the dread to disobey and displease Him.⁸ This dread follows two tracks of motivation. One may reflect more maturity than the other, but both are motivations to avoid sin and pursue holiness.

Dread of Chastisement

Disobedience has consequences. This is a lesson that parents are obliged to teach their children. Discipline is necessary but never pleasant, either to the parent who grieves over the misconduct or to the child who suffers pain. Proverbs, on multiple occasions, gives instructions to parents: ‘He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes’ (Prov. 13:24); ‘Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying’ (Prov. 19:18); ‘Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him’ (Prov. 22:15); ‘Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and deliver his soul from hell’ (Prov. 23:13-14); ‘The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame. Correct thy son, and he shall give rest; yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul’ (Prov. 29:15, 17). A common notion in all these references is that this chastisement is remedial rather than simply punitive. But it would hurt, nonetheless.

Significantly, the Psalmist compares the Lord’s dealing with His people in parental terms. Psalm 103:13 avers, ‘Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him.’ Part of the exercise of that fatherly compassion is the necessary discipline. Thus, Hebrews declares, ‘For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth’ (12:6). This divinely administered discipline is an evidence of sonship and is remedial but unpleasant, nonetheless.

Notwithstanding parental discipline’s link to love, no child wants to experience it. The fear of discipline can be an effective motivator for obedience. Confessedly,

8. “Reverence” carries a positive connotation. It describes a sense of awe as we perceive the majesty of God. “Godly fear,” on the other hand, is a sense of profound awe and intimidation as we see the power and holiness of God, who “is a consuming fire.” That refers to His power to destroy, His holy reaction against sin’ (John MacArthur, *Worship: The Ultimate Priority* [Chicago: Moody, 2012], p. 115).

as a boy there were times when I behaved myself properly in the face of temptations because I knew the consequences if my dad found out about my misbehaving. Maybe I should say *when* he found out, because it seemed he always found out. Although I still remember times years ago when I did not resist the temptations and suffered from the weeping willow switch, I can also say that I cannot remember any occasion when I was punished for doing something that pleased my parents. They administered punishment only when my behavior displeased them because I had broken a family rule, and they did not want me to do it again. The weeping willow tree in the front yard stood as a deterrent to misbehavior. I loved my parents and held them in the highest respect, but I did fear them and what they could do with a switch. Fear of the switch may well have been an immature motive for obedience, but it worked – most of the time.

This fear of chastisement is a legitimate motive for avoiding sin and pursuing holiness.⁹ When the Lord warned His people about disobeying the rules of the covenant, He described the various forms of fear-producing chastisement that He would inflict upon them (Deut. 28:66). Fear is part of sin’s punishment. When the Lord, in time, executed that chastisement, He explained His remedial purpose in disciplining: ‘I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early’ (Hosea 5:15). In one of his protestations of innocence, Job expressed his fear of divine chastisement as a reason for his integrity: ‘For destruction from God was a terror to me’ (Job 31:23).

It may be argued that fearing God because of potential chastisement is an immature motive for holiness. After all, John says that ‘There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love’ (1 John. 4:18). John’s word for ‘perfect’ actually means ‘mature.’ Maturity is the process of growth and presupposes a period of immaturity. The word ‘torment’ means ‘punishment,’ so the idea is that fear has something to do with punishment. Fear entails a bit of anxiety for sure. Such a fear may very well be immature, but an immature motive for holiness is far better than none. As maturity progresses, anxiety over punishment gives way to the focus on love for the person. The line of the familiar hymn describes this maturing transition: ‘’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.’

Dread of Marring the Relationship

Remember that sanctification is progressive; it involves a growth in holiness. As the believer matures in his relationship with the Lord, the desire to do what pleases the Lord in no way diminishes. The more we grow in the knowledge of God (the head factor), the more we will behave in a way that pleases Him (the hands factor). Because the Christian grows in the experience of love for God, he grows in the fear

9. ‘Worship is life lived in the presence of an infinitely righteous and omnipresent God by one utterly aware of His holiness and consequently overwhelmed with a sense of his or her own unholiness.... A true worshipper comes into the presence of God with a healthy but soul-shattering fear’ (MacArthur, *Worship*, pp. 114-15).