

From Acorn to Oak

Who is God, and what is he like? Part 25: What is the fear of God?

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I was stopped for a light at 31st Street and Route 83 in Chicago's western suburb of Oak Brook. As I was waiting, I noticed a big decal on the rear window of the car in front of me that proclaimed "No Fear." I couldn't help but think how that contrasted with one of the major themes of the Bible: Fear God and live!

Some quickly say, "But the biblical concept of fearing God simply means to have awe for and to revere God." They should check even the English dictionary for the meaning of both of those words, the root of which primarily involves fear. In the Bible's original Hebrew and Greek, the words translated fear with respect to God literally mean fear. (See, e.g., Hebrews 10:31; Romans 11:20; cf. Psalm 90:7-8 and 11-17.) Related passages confirm this concept.

Consider also the source of respect. Is there not typically at least a tinge of fear (of consequences), whether admitted or not, if someone disregards, and especially disobeys, one who is in a superior position? How long is the tenure in an organization of an employee who does not respect the one(s) to whom he or she is accountable, including having a healthy sense of fear of consequences for disobedience or even failing to meet agreed upon standards and conditions of employment (e.g., production deadlines)?

Be honest now. Who are you more inclined to obey? An authority who has a reputation as being "a soft touch" or one who though nice will exact justice swiftly?

Compare the covenant stipulations in God's covenant with his people (e.g., Deuteronomy 28). Notice that the Hebrew word translated "revere" and "awesome" in verse 58 is יָרָא, transliterated *yāra*, be afraid, i.e., as the context reveals, of disobeying God. God is no one to "mess around with," and he does not take disobedience lightly, which as we've seen in earlier essays, is referred to as no less than rebellion.¹

¹ Rebellion brings to mind opposition to government. Thus, consider Romans 13:1-7, especially verses 1-5. "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror (φόβος, *phobos* fear, terror, alarm; reverence, respect) for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. ³Do you want to be free from fear (> φοβέω, *phobeō* verb, fear, be afraid, become terrified, reverence, respect) of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, (> φοβέω, *phobeō* verb, fear, be afraid, become terrified, reverence, respect) for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience." Thus, the source of the fear is not necessarily in the person in authority, as implied in verse three, but in what he can and will do to punish disobedience. Further, this disobedience is rebellion not only against the government but against God who has instituted the government.

The NIV translates Hebrews 10:31 as, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” The Greek word they render, “dreadful,” is φοβερός, transliterated *phoberos*, meaning also fearful, terrible (NASB, “terrifying”), frightful. How do we understand this aspect of our relationship with God, who in his Word is revealed as love to the core of his being?

In Moses’ account of the Israelites’ flight from Egypt in Exodus 14, he says the Israelites looked up as Pharaoh and his army approached, and they were in great fear (v. 10 RSV; terrified, NIV). This was not just a reverent respect! After they were safely across the Red Sea and saw the Egyptians lying dead, which they recognized as due to the mighty power of the LORD, “the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him.” (v. 31) Significantly, Moses uses the most common Hebrew word for fear, ‘r’, both in verse 10 to describe their visceral, abject, terror as they sensed they were about to be vanquished and in verse 31 to indicate the fear they felt toward the LORD.

Many Bible passages link fear and trembling, thus indicating a real fear, not just a respectful awe. The link is explicit with respect to God and our salvation in several texts. (Cf. e.g., Daniel 6:26 NASB) Mark records the incident where the woman with a 12-year hemorrhage reaches out in faith that just touching Jesus’ garment will make her well. Jesus, perceiving that power had gone out from him looked for the person who touched him. The woman, knowing what had occurred, approached him and fell at his feet; Mark records (in the original Greek) that she was “fearing [φοβηθεῖσα, *phobētheisa*, having been frightened (>φοβέω, *phobeō* verb, fear, be afraid, become terrified; worship, reverence, respect)] and trembling [τρέμουσα, *tremousa*, trembling (>τρέμω, *tremō*, to tremble, quiver)].” (5:33) Jesus then said to her “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.” (v. 34) Counterintuitively in much human thinking, yet her faithful fear resulted in peace.

We read in Luke 2:9-10 of the link between fear and terror, when an angel appears to the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem. “An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.’” (Luke 2:9-10) The concept and the word, terrified, is the translation of two words used together, the root of which is *phobeō*, and the word, afraid, in verse 10 is *phobeō*. The shepherds were scared. And understandably so, until the angel quickly put them at ease with the Word from the Lord. They were truly afraid; otherwise, the angel would not have told them to not be afraid. Furthermore, it should be noted that these shepherds were tough people; they did not scare easily. An important part of their job description, and why they were outside with the flocks at night, is that they had to fight off thieves and predatory animals

Paul records in 2 Corinthians 7:15 that Timothy reported his affection for the Corinthian church was all the greater when he recalled their obedience, “receiving him with fear [*phobou*] and trembling [*tromou*].” Paul writes to the Philippians, “my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear [*phobou*] and trembling [*tromou*].” (2:12)

The apostle goes on to explain that such a mentality and spiritual orientation will help keep them on the same page with God's will, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life...." (vss. 13-16a)

The writer of Hebrews reveals that when Moses saw the mountain which only he was to approach to meet God who is most holy, he said it was such a fearful [*phoberon*] sight that he was terrified [*ekphobos*] and trembling [*entromos*]. (12:21) One more indication that these Greek words are to be interpreted literally in these passages is seen by comparing them with the affect accompanying slaves' obedience of their earthly masters, which Paul said should be done with "fear [*phobou*] and trembling [*tromou*]." (Ephesians 6:5) The apostle said that they should treat their masters this way "not only to win their favor when their eye is on [them], but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from [their] heart." (6:6) He then explained that in so doing they would present a fine witness for Christ. "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free." (6:7-8)

Fear Linked to God's Holiness

Some say that those who fear God do so because of his almighty power. However, if they understand God as being loving, as he truly is, why would they have any fear? Wouldn't they conclude he will always use his power for their protection and other benevolent acts? No. There is more to it than that. I submit it is not primarily his almighty power that is the key reason people fear God, but that they, especially his covenant people, know he is holy, and they are not—indeed that he is holy, holy, holy, and that he will not accept sin, a fatal flaw in human nature since the fall of Adam and Eve. Accordingly, in the Bible the word fear is *not* used to describe a human being's affect toward God *until after* that fall as described in Genesis 3. Yet fear is the first emotion Scripture records Adam feeling after he and Eve had sinned against God. (v 10)

The Psalmist commands people to "Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth." (96:9) The Hebrew verbs translated worship and tremble are both imperatives, commands, and the Hebrew word rendered tremble also means to writhe and to be in pain (typically labor pains). In the light of God's holiness, the sense of sin causes pain in the consciousness of worshipers who are emerging from acorns to oaks of righteousness.

What a stark contrast to the politically correct and seeker constrained expressions that omit any reference to this Biblical teaching, with the result that many enter the sanctuary of God who is not only holy, but holy, holy, holy, i.e., most holy (cf. my essay on God's holiness at <http://www.fromacorntooak12.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Part-10-Who-is-God-Holy-Holy-Holy.pdf>), with the cavalier idea that they're paying respects to their Divine Buddy, getting another good mark in the ledger of life, and that he should be

glad they showed up! Some even think that now they don't have to come back for a while. The first worshipers long for the opportunity to hear God's assurance of pardon following the prayer of confession; the latter are mystified by such a practice and often turned off. No wonder many worship services today omit the prayer of confession and the accompanying words of assurance.

Another aspect of the political correctness that is distracting leaders and others from God's Word, and motivating decisions that are contrary to his Word and will in too many churches today, is especially dangerous. It is the aversion to offending anyone.

Yet the cross is offensive and even foolish to the world that is perishing (Galatians 5:11 and 1 Corinthians 1:23), but Christ is the power and wisdom of God. We are called to proclaim Christ as the only way, truth, and life, and that no one comes to the Father except through him. (John 14:6) This message is not at all politically correct, but most importantly it is Biblically correct and theologically correct!

Our calling and our desire are to please the triune God, not the world, and to proclaim Christ, crucified, risen, reigning, and ruling. If we truly love and care for people, as Christ has commanded, we must courageously preach and teach Christ as the only way to salvation. To be sure we are to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), but we must speak the truth: Contrary to political correctness, all other religions are wrong; there are no other gods to be in the presence of the one true God. (Exodus 20:3)

We are called to be holy to God. Remember holy means uncommon, and pure and separated to God. We are not to conform to the world but be transformed by the renewing of our mind in order to do God's good, pleasing, and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

In the eighth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet warns the Israelites to remember their holiness to the LORD and not rely on the pagan Assyrians for their help; their gods are useless and of no help, and the Assyrians' religion will lead the Israelites into evil that is abhorrent to God who is most holy. In verse 13, we read the following:

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,

We see in this verse that the prophet is employing the literary device, frequently used in Hebrew poetry, called parallelism, in which two statements are made together, whereby one further explains the meaning of the other. There are several types of parallelism, and the one here is called synonymous parallelism; i.e., the second part restates the first part as a way of explaining the first. Thus, dread (רָצַח, *ārats*) is used to further explain the fear (מֹרָא, *môrā'*) to which it refers. Clearly, this fear is more than just respect or even reverence; dread is what the Israelites should feel if they disregard their holy relationship with God and

think of disobeying him. God does not take lightly disregarding the calling and mission he has given his people.

Such fear will help God's people to remember who they are, indeed Whose they are, i.e., to Whom they belong, the mission to which God has called them, the obedience he requires, and in so doing they will be more inclined to function accordingly. Since we in Christ are God's covenant people, Abraham's seed, a holy nation, and a people belonging to God (Galatians 3:26-29; 1 Peter 2:9-12), we must do so as well.

The response of a sinful human being to God's holiness is true fear, a genuine concern for well being, recognizing his or her guilt and unworthiness to be in the presence of God. When I think about it, if it were not for being in Christ, the least one of my many sins would be enough to cast me far from the presence of God forever...a fearsome thought!

Listen to what the Holy Spirit says through the apostle Peter:

¹³Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.

¹⁴As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.

¹⁵But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;

¹⁶for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

¹⁷Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. (1 Peter 1:13-17)

Again, the original Greek word translated fear is *phobō*. The NIV as the NRSV includes the concept of reverence, but they wisely translate *phobō* to include the very real aspect of fear, but not stark terror (because of our redemption in Christ as the verses that follow remind us), as a guiding principle for remembering to live as people called to be holy to God who is most holy.

Those who do not have the new nature, provided by the Holy Spirit, try to psychologize away or ignore their fear and guilt. Those who have the new birth and the faith in Jesus Christ it provides thank God for their fear, the periodic reemergence of which reminds them of who they are, of their sin, and of his grace, which informs their understanding as well as their choices to obey and leads them into uncommon joy.

Of course, such a concept of fearing God, or fearing anyone, is repugnant today. Commenting on those who try to mitigate the onerous connotation of fear by explaining that fear simply means respect, Ellen Davis of Yale Divinity School has written in her book, *Getting Involved with God*, "in avoiding the word 'fear,' translators are taking the edge off the point that the biblical writers are making. The writers are speaking first of all of our proper gut response to God." (102) However, while respect is an aspect of the major word for fear in the Old and the New Testaments, both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament have other words that mean respect.

Fear Linked to Consequences

Clearly when the Bible speaks of fearing God, it means respecting him, but that respect also involves *a genuine fear of consequences of disobeying God who is holy, holy, holy*. (Isaiah 6:1-8) As one theologian has said, God's holiness is his only attribute that is repeated three times (the Hebrew language not having a superlative, it communicated the concept of something being most or above all of its kind by repeating it thrice). Thus, we don't see in the Bible that God is love, love, love, or omniscient, omniscient, omniscient, but we do read in both testaments of his Word that he is holy, holy, holy. (See also Revelation 4:8.) The New Testament writers, always holding that the Old Testament is the Word of God for the church following Christ, did not therefore repeat everything in the first testament, but they did repeat the three-fold emphasis on God's holiness.

Though speaking on the human level, the concept of fear connected with consequences is clearly evident in the commandment pertaining to a rebellious son in Deuteronomy 21:18-21. The law addresses a painful situation where a stubborn and rebellious son refuses to obey his father and mother and even to listen to them when they discipline him. In such a situation, the law prescribes that the parents are to take hold of the rebellious son and bring him to the elders at the town gate where the following is to be done:

They shall say to the elders, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard." Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid. (Deuteronomy 21:20-21)

All the Israelites will hear of this stark punishment and be afraid. Afraid of what? Certainly, the children will fear the same consequences will occur to them if they engage in similar rebellion. With that healthy fear in the back of their minds, do you think their decision-making and behavior was affected...in the right direction? As I will describe in more detail below, my behavior as a child was definitely influenced in the direction of choosing to do what was good rather than what was evil with the knowledge (as a result of a few painful experiences) of what my dad would do if I did the latter.

Fear Linked to God's Wrath against Evil and Sin

In Proverbs 9:10 we see that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." That reality is at least a partial explanation of the widespread lack of both fear and wisdom in our time. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, David explained that "concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes." (Psalm 36:1)

Notice Psalm 119:161, "Rulers persecute me without cause, but my heart trembles at your word." The word in verse 161b translated tremble is פָּחַד, *pāchadh*, literally means to tremble, to be afraid. In verse 176, the Psalmist reveals the reason for his trembling at God's word: "I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten

your commands.” But notice that his trembling, because he takes seriously his accountability to God, who is holy, holy, holy, does not involve a dislike of, or a desire to avoid, God’s word, his law, commands, and decrees, which is clearly seen in the verses between 161 and 176. In the very next verse after he says “my heart “trembles at your word,” (161) the writer says, “I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil. [v. 162] I hate and abhor falsehood but I love your law. [v. 163]...Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble. [v. 165]...I obey your statutes, for I love them greatly.” (v. 167)

Let us not fail to observe two important points in what the Psalmist is saying: (1) his response to his trembling at God’s word: NOT dislike, disregard, rejection, or avoidance BUT a strong desire to obey God’s statutes, and (2) the motivation for his obedience of God’s statutes (his word), which he reveals in v. 167: love, not dread or terror. The Psalmist simply recognizes and states that God’s word brings the awareness of his sinfulness, which causes terror in the light of his accountability to God but all in the context of his awareness of, appreciation for, and love of all the aspects of God’s word, its laws, statutes, decrees, commands, promises, all of which bring such profound and extensive blessings when followed. Further, this is not a passing thought in these verses; it is the recurring theme throughout this longest chapter in the whole Bible!

It is difficult to maintain balance in all aspects of life. We tend toward one side and then the other, underemphasizing the side not accentuated at the time. Decades ago the pendulum swung toward focusing on God’s judgment. Then people saw the need to emphasize his grace, especially his love, where we are now but losing sight of God’s judgment on sin and his refusal to allow it in his presence much less to coexist with it.

To be sure God’s essence is love (1 John 4:8), but precisely because he is loving from the core of his being, he is also just and will judge the sin which offends him due to his holiness and due to the hurt sin does to the people he loves. We understand the principle: it is similar to the reason a parent disciplines his or her child for deliberate disobedience in order to administer justice and help prevent a repeat of harmful behavior.

God is never a cosmic curmudgeon or a killjoy; neither is he ever arbitrary. He hates and judges sin, because it always harms people he loves. Sin offends God’s holiness, indeed because he is holy, holy, holy, but also because he loves the people he has created, and he knows sin is never good; he loves those victimized by sin, their own and others’.

In our time and culture, we encounter a milieu of political, social, and theological correctness fraught with spiritual danger. It is not politically correct to fear anything or anyone, and if someone speaks out against a politically sacrosanct ideology, person, or group, for example, the unbiblical practices of homosexuality, Islam, or illegal immigrants who have committed crimes, he or she is accused of being homophobic, Islamophobic, or xenophobic. We should keep in mind that these accusations are examples of the logical fallacy called *argumentum ad hominem* (literally, argument directed toward the man), where the attempt is to discredit the person instead of addressing the validity of his or her argument and its rationale. Further, the accusations

are not only illogical but part of the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged. (Ephesians 6:10-18; Revelation 12-20) The goal of these opponents pertaining to Christians, is to shut us up and hinder our witness for Christ and the truth of the Gospel. With the knowledge of what they are doing, and with God's help, we are equipped to withstand their attacks and "speak the truth in love." (Ephesians 4:15)

Relatedly, another spiritual danger we also observe nowadays, is people referring to God as their pal, so loving he wouldn't hurt a flea, the great grandfather in the sky. Concerning the concept of God judging a person who has sinned, you've likely heard someone say words to this effect: "My god would never do that!" We're seeing in our society what I call the "wussification of God." Yet, he truly is no wimp. People who make such statements either worship a false God or, if they are Christians, they need to learn more about the God who has revealed himself in the Scriptures.² Misguided Christians who have not thought carefully and thoroughly enough about this matter are inclined to think that if they portray God as only loving, and not as a Judge, will cause more people to be attracted to and believe in him. That is an unwarranted assumption and Biblical heresy. Many, if not most, of the people who reject the idea of God as Judge, aren't all that inclined to believe in him period. Most importantly, we must NEVER change how God reveals himself in his Word...for any reason, even to try to help people believe in him. The God who calls us to be his witnesses, is who he reveals himself to be in his Word. Any other representation is a false god.

The one and only living, true, and real God's Word to us is very different! A key part of his holiness is his wrath toward sin. Sin and evil offend God who is most holy. People today are worried about offending someone or being offended; we should be most concerned about offending God! Another reason he hates sin and evil is because of his great love for his people who are hurt by sin and evil.

Is there any difference today in the engagement with false gods as that which occurred in the Bible times? It is especially serious, indeed with eternal implications, when God's people become involved with false gods. Employing the powerful analogy of marriage and its related metaphors in his relationship with his people, as he does throughout his Word, God led the prophet Jeremiah to write

⁶During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there.

⁷I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it.

⁸I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery.

² We need to address this matter not only to correct the theology but in our need to engage men. Men are not attracted to wimps. (Of course, I don't know of any women who are either.)

⁹Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. (Jeremiah 3:6-9)

It takes little imagination, and none on the part of people who have experienced it, to sense the hurt, pain, anguish, anger, and wrath as well as the host of other negative emotions involved in adultery. And that awareness gives us only a finite sensitivity for how God views such rejection by his people.

Try to consider also what God's discipline of unfaithful Israel meant. First of all, in their rejection of the one true God, most evil in itself, their adultery with false gods involved worship practices of the most vile and immoral sort, involving child sacrifice, male and female prostitution as a form of worship, and other human degradation. They ignored God's repeated warnings of what he would do if they disobeyed, so when his patience ended and the time was right in his sight, God used the Assyrians to remove unfaithful Israel from the land. Further, the Assyrians set the bar for ferociousness with their unparalleled military might, machinery, and strategy including but not limited to ruthlessly applied psychological terror tactics involving stacking the heads of their victims in huge heaps in front of the walls of the cities they were attacking, corpses impaled on stakes, and bodies skinned alive.

All the above occurred only about a hundred years prior to Jeremiah's prophecy to Judah. It was still fresh in Judah's memory. And yet, God declares through his prophet, "I saw that [Israel's] unfaithful sister Judah had no fear." (v. 8) No fear?! The obvious reference in this context is to the true fear of God's wrath against such evil, including the means he would use to judge that evil and discipline his people who were becoming worthless for the accomplishment of his redemptive purposes. (2 Kings 17:15; Jeremiah 2:5; Isaiah 41:24)

One of my favorite New Testament scholars, Leon Morris, in an article on "Propitiation" observed that the Greek word, ἱλαστήριον, *hilastērion*, translated propitiation, means the removal of divine wrath. Dr. Morris writes that the wrath of God is referred to 585 times throughout the Old Testament. He then says,

While God's wrath is not mentioned as frequently in the NT as the Old, it is there. Man's sin receives its due reward, not because of some impersonal retribution, but because God's wrath is directed against it (Rom. 1:18, 24, 26, 28). The whole of the argument of the opening part of Romans is that all men, Gentiles and Jews alike, are sinners, and that they come under the wrath and the condemnation of God. When Paul turns to salvation, he thinks of Christ's death as *hilastērion* (Rom. 3:25), a means of removing the divine wrath. The paradox of the OT is repeated in the New that God himself provides the means of removing his own wrath. The love of the Father is shown in that he "sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (I John 4:10). The purpose of Christ's becoming "a merciful and faithful high priest" was "to make propitiation for the sins

of the people” (Heb. 2:17). His propitiation is adequate for all (I John 2:2).

The consistent Bible view is that the sin of man has incurred the wrath of God. That wrath is averted only by Christ’s atoning offering. From this standpoint his saving work is properly called propitiation.

We should never lose sight of the Biblical teaching that the core of God’s being is his great love. (1 John 4:8) Nevertheless, that great love is most meaningful when we also keep in mind his divine wrath against the sin and evil that spurns and ignores his holiness. Morris’ observation that “God himself provides the means of removing his own wrath” is true, *but, we must promptly proclaim, it is only efficacious and effective for those who confess Christ.* And that is a fearsome thought for those outside of Christ, *which also strongly motivates us to reach out to them in love with the unmitigated Gospel of our Lord and Savior.*

Fear Linked with God’s Love

Stop. Think about what the above means. First about what it meant to God. What great and unfathomable love he and his only begotten Son demonstrated, as the Father and the Holy Spirit had to watch the ugly and extremely painful agony inflicted on the Son, our Lord Jesus!

However, does not the Bible teach that “God is love,” as we saw in an earlier part in this series, and that “perfect love drives out fear?” (1 John 4:8, 18) True. Nevertheless, as we also noted, true love is just and righteous. *Since* God loves us, to preserve his integrity and his love for the oppressed, and as part of his caring, he will discipline those he loves and judge everyone. “My son, do not despise the LORD’S discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.” (Proverbs 3:11-12) The writer of Hebrews adds that “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.” (12:10)

I never doubted the love of my wonderful earthly father; his cherishing of me was beyond question and reinforced in countless ways throughout our life together. Nevertheless, when as a child I transgressed my limits, his discipline was swift, fair, and sometimes painful: emotionally and, on a few occasions, physically as his belt crossed my bottom. That administration of corporal punishment occurred very few times, but just enough times and with sufficient strength for me to fear a recurrence should I disobey, a healthy fear that guided me in deciding whether I should or should not do something and kept me from making extremely regrettable choices. Having experienced that reaction to my transgression, I lived in constant awareness of his love that included a real fear of what would occur should I step out of line. That genuine fear of fair consequences kept me out of much trouble, for which I am eternally grateful to my dad and to our Father in heaven who provided the model he followed. (Proverbs 13:24, 19:18, 22:15, 23:13, 29:15; Hebrews 12:5-11)

Fearing God helps us obey, which we will reflect on more in the next section. As Moses told the Israelites, “the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.” (Exodus 20:20) Notice that the Hebrew word fear of fearing God is the same Hebrew word as being afraid, both aspects of which appear in this same verse. “Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid, (> יָרָא, *yāra*’) God has come to test you, so that the fear (יִרְאָה, *yir’āh* > יָרָא, *yāra*’) of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.” Again, we see here not a morbid and paralyzing terror but a very real yet healthy fear of the consequences of disobeying, i.e., rebelling against God—a very dangerous decision and unwise act.

The link of the fear of God with his love is seen throughout the Bible. Another of the texts which makes this connection is Psalm 103:11-12, “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” Consider also Psalm 147:11, “the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.”

The Bible also links the fear of God with his forgiveness, an aspect of his love. The Psalmist wrote, “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.” (130:3-4) Therefore? Yes, the stark reality declared in verse three, that God judges sin, followed by the comforting reality revealed in verse four, that God forgives sin, causes the fear of LORD that keeps us on track with him, לִמָּעַן, *lěma’an*, so that, we avoid displeasing God any more than we have already done and so that we can please him and do what is right in his sight. Also, our consciousness of being forgiven motivates our fear of God, which John Stek in his commentary in the *NIV Study Bible* interprets as meaning “[h]onored, worshiped, trusted and served as the one true God. If God were not forgiving, people could only flee from him in terror.”

In fact, understanding reality is the key to understanding the concept of fearing God. Having a truly realistic view of life begins with having a realistic view of God, whose Word explains reality to us. I find the people who have the most difficulty understanding this concept are those who do not have a realistic, i.e., Biblical, view of God, and much else in their worldview lacks reality. As my father and grandfather used to tell me, “So much of what these people have to say doesn’t ring true.” They speak in such terms as, “My god would never do anything to make me afraid.” They thus disclose that they do not view God as being righteous and just, who will not compromise his integrity and coexist with sin and evil, and who will not “turn a blind eye” to sin and evil that harm people he loves.

Nor do those who fail to comprehend these realities view themselves realistically, with the Biblical revelation that they, as all human beings, are sinful and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23) Thus, when people who have the view of God, shaped not by God’s self-disclosure in his Word but by their own inaccurate thinking, expressed in such terms as “my god wouldn’t hurt a flea,” we can easily see how they have no room in their thinking for a healthy fear of God. When we hear them speak in this manner, we who belong to God, whom he has called to serve him, including being his witnesses, should

help these people to see where they need to make changes in their view of God in order to comply with his Word, and to receive the many benefits of doing so.

Fear Linked with Obedience

God's Word links a healthy fear of him, and of other authority figures (cf. Romans 13:1-7) including parents, to obedience, which God requires of his people, not to earn salvation, as all other religions teach, but as our *grateful response* to him for saving us and which gives evidence of the genuineness of our faith. The fear of the Lord is thus seen in actions. "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones." (Proverbs 3:7-8; See also 8:13.) As one writer has said, "In my discovery of the Savior who is also my Judge, I discover several reasons to obey him. Fear is one of these."

Look closely at Psalm 34. In verses 9-11, we read

⁹Fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing.

¹⁰The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

¹¹Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

The word saints in verse nine comes from the Hebrew, *qādhôsh*, meaning holy, which is a key concept, that Biblical scholars call a major motif, a vital and interlinked theme that runs throughout both the Old and the New Testaments and shapes the Bible's message, which we discussed briefly in the section above pertaining to God's holiness. Holy means separated to God out of that which is common, profane, evil, and unholy. That which is made holy to God is employed for his purposes and is to be pure. Recall Jesus' teaching that he is the way, the truth, and the life and that no one comes to the Father but by him (Christ). (John 14:6) The Father, as the rest of the triune God, is most holy (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8), and he will not have in his presence that which is unholy. Yet, because of his great love, which is the core of his very being, (1 John 4:8) at great cost to himself he sent his only begotten Son to do the righteousness that he requires, that no other human being can do, but which is credited to all by faith who believe in Christ Jesus. (Romans 4)

The rest of verse nine and the following verses teach us the unending blessings that come from fearing the LORD and how to obtain those blessings, i.e., what fearing the LORD means and how to do so. Here we see the link between fearing God and obeying his will.

¹²Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days,

¹³keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies.

¹⁴Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

¹⁵The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry;

¹⁶the face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth.

¹⁷The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles.

¹⁸The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

¹⁹A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all;

²⁰he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken.

²¹Evil will slay the wicked; the foes of the righteous will be condemned.

²²The LORD redeems his servants; no one will be condemned who takes refuge in him. (Psalm 34:12-22)

God has not promised to give those who disobey him everything they want. However, those who are righteous, who truly desire to do his will, they are the ones who are close to him and who have his ear. Biblical scholars explain that verse 20, together with Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12, is a prophecy fulfilled by Jesus' sacrifice of himself for the salvation of those who believe in him, as revealed in the Gospel by John, "These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken.'" (John 19:36 NRSV) Jesus accomplished the righteousness required by God for access to him which is credited to all of us who believe.

On the contrary, notice verse 21. Ironically, and sadly, the very evil the wicked so disobediently pursue destroys them. They need to hear God's Word in verse nine, which reveals that the opposite is the outcome for those who fear God, "Fear the LORD, you his saints [i.e., you who are holy to him], for those who fear him lack nothing...those who seek the LORD lack no good thing."

Fear not only involves God's love, but also the joy he gives in obedience to his will. Jesus said, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:10-11) Our Lord also taught that "[t]hey who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." (John 14:21 NRSV) Thus, how we act is a tangible indication of how much we love Jesus.

We've been reflecting on a healthy fear of God. Such a fear keeps us from the careless attitude of many today who glibly speak God's name in vain and ignore him and his will. This holy fear merges with other motivators to guide us to obedience which honors God, who is most holy, and enables us to accomplish the purposes to which he has called us and that give meaning and significance to our lives.

An analogy Dr. James Dobson used to illustrate another concept helps here as well. Compare the fear one experiences when being stopped by a police officer after exceeding the speed limit. In response to a very polite question, "May I see your driver's license please?" trembling fingers extract the plastic card from his or her wallet. The fear is not of the officer him or herself (he or she hasn't harmed or even threatened the driver) but of

what that officer can do, that is very painful (give a ticket which results in a significant fine and possibly other painful punishments [e.g., loss of license]), which possibilities cause fear. This fear, as all other fears, doesn't remain at this height, but its underlying existence in our day-to-day driving motivates us to keep within the prescribed limits, much more so than would be the case if the police officer had no authority to *do* anything if we disobey the law.

The thought of what God, who is holy, holy, holy, will do to those who disregard his will, as those against whom Isaiah was prophesying (8:13), causes in the wise person a fear which is healthy. We, however, do not live in morbid terror of God, especially because of our security in Christ, but our fear of his actions, were we to disregard and disobey his will, leads to wisdom, well-being, and thanksgiving not only in November but forever. (Proverbs 9:10) I shudder to think of the result of God's righteous judgment on what I deserve were it not for Christ, but that thought of Christ and being credited with his righteousness brings me instant calm and eternal gratitude to God whose true love is also just. (See also Isaiah 8:11-17, esp. v. 13.)

Christians who are maturing in their development from acorn to oak keep in mind who they are and Whose they are. They also clearly distinguish between the perfect character of God, who is most holy, and their own character which is unfit for his fellowship. When that distinction is made in the growing awareness of the magnitude of God's love to them, an eternal gratitude motivates a desire to obey, to do his will.

Such a perspective should guide our decision-making. When we reflect on what to do in a matter, and we think of what others will say, that's important to an extent (e.g., Romans 12:17-18), but infinitely more important, and the question we should ask above all others, is "What does God think? What is his opinion?" God's opinion overrides all others...by far! Infinitely so!!

For Worship Leaders

Consider these texts from God's Word.

1. Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the LORD." (Leviticus 19:30)
2. "Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the LORD. (Leviticus 26:2)
3. "Your testimonies are fully confirmed; Holiness befits Your house, O LORD, forevermore." (Psalm 93:5 (NASB))

What do you think God is telling us when he repeats the same verse just seven chapters later in Leviticus? Maybe that this concept is very important to him? (How many times have you who are a parent said to your children, "How many times have I told you....?!")

In the Leviticus passages the Hebrew verb translated “have reverence for” is תִּירָאֵי, *tîra’û*, which literally means “you will fear.” As we’ve been observing in this essay, this fear is a healthy respect in awe of God rather than being morbidly terrified of him. Though God has revealed that the core of his being is love (1 John 4:8), and he discloses that love on every page of the Bible, nevertheless he is also holy, holy, holy, that is, separate, pure, and uncommon. He does not permit evil in his presence, and he will judge it. This awareness should motivate great reverence and respect for God and his sanctuary, and a healthy fear of the consequences of disobeying God helps activate that reverence in his sanctuary and in his people’s daily walk with him in his service.³

We need to be careful in teaching the Biblical concept of fearing God. Many people have a distorted view of God; we need to help them bring their understanding of God closer to that which he has revealed in his Word and not add to their confusion. Consider the context in which you are teaching. Specifically, what is the background of your class concerning their understanding of who God is, what he is like, and what he is doing?

1. Are they people, usually older and from a conservative church background, who remember being taught in childhood that God is a strict judge who easily sends people to hell?
2. Or, are they people who have grown up with the idea, a reaction to the older teaching, that God is their best friend and that he just sits back in his rocker, smiles at everything and “wouldn’t hurt a flea?” This perspective is the more prevalent view today and the reason for the approach taken in this chapter.
3. Or, are they somewhere in between these two views?

If you have people in the first group in your class, be sensitive that their background, and the previous learning they’ve developed from it, may mentally shape what you are saying to understand something you are not intending to say. Take time to explain and discuss this important Biblical theme of fearing God. Help people to mentally process this concept correctly.

Those in the second group may want to leave that cup of coffee outside the sanctuary and have it after the worship service. They will do well to think before entering the sanctuary of God, about who he is and what he is like; that while being all love, he is also holy, holy, holy; all knowing; righteous and just; and therefore, he judges sin and evil. They will do well not to saunter arrogantly into his sanctuary, and high-five it with friends, talking loudly without any regret for sins committed, but rather with a humble and strong desire for the forgiveness God offers due to the huge sacrifice of his only begotten Son, love at a monumental cost, and with a stirring awareness that this grace is totally undeserved. This awareness should cause a strong desire to hear more of God’s Word and an accompanying eruption of gratitude flowing from the depths of their soul, gratitude that they are not only surviving in the presence of God who is holy, holy, holy,

³ *Complete Biblical Library Hebrew-English Dictionary* – Heth-Yodh.

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but thriving due to his merciful grace. Then, following the benediction, leaving the sanctuary with a renewed sense of the important mission to which God has called them and the help he offers, they can truly enjoy that unique Biblical fellowship in Christ with other believers in the Lord.

Presbyterian Pastor and Fuller Theological Seminary Adjunct Professor, William Eisenhower, has well written, “We have to conclude that while an unfiltered experience is terrifying, it also brings an unshakable reassurance. We are unsettled from our false securities, but then resettled in the true security of God’s love. Perfect love does indeed cast out fear. Yet the implication is that those who have never trembled from head to toe will never know God’s perfect love.”

For Further Reflection and Discussion

1. How would you answer the question before us: “What does it mean to fear God?”
2. Explain how a healthy fear of God is consistent with, and draws us closer to, his love.
3. How does a healthy fear of God help us live in holiness to him?
4. What is the difference between fearing God and being terrified of him?
5. As parents and grandparents, how can we teach our children what it means to fear God?
6. Who would you rather have for a next-door neighbor? One who believes that while the core of God’s being is love, that love issues forth in a holy and just wrath against sin that hurts people he loves and is grievously offensive to him **or** one who sees God as being the great grandfather in the sky who sits back on his rocker watching what is going on and just loving everybody? Why did you make the choice you did? Which neighbor would be more inclined to care about what is important to you?
7. If people properly understood what the Bible means when it says we should fear God, what difference would that mean in the following contexts?
 - a. In our family?
 - b. In our church?
 - c. At school?
 - d. At work?
 - e. In our society?
 - f. Elsewhere in the world?

8. For pastors and other worship leaders:
 - a. What can we do to facilitate worshipers' proper attitude when they enter the sanctuary of God who is holy, holy, holy?
 - b. What difference will it make to the worshipers, already during the worship service, and in their daily lives, if they come into God's sanctuary with the conscious awareness they are in the presence of God who is most holy rather than if they come in thinking they're in a nice big room and wondering who else showed up and, if they think of God at all, that he's "all love and wouldn't hurt a flea?"