

The Fear of the Lord – Part 1

There is a Bible term that seems to have fallen into disuse. In this age, where everyone wants a quick-fix Christianity, a health and wealth Christianity, a meet-my-needs Christianity, you don't hear this term preached much anymore.

If you go into the Christian book store, you'll have to wade through masses of books on how to be blessed, gain everything you want in prayer, use God for a great marriage and 1000 other self-help books titled under the name 'Christian' before you will find any book dealing with this topic. You'll listen to podcasts or watch online sermons for hours before hearing or seeing a sermon preached on this topic.

What is this phrase? It's one that's the Bible repeats over 60 times: fear the Lord. For many today – fearing the Lord sounds outdated. Indeed, some Christians will tell you that fearing God is an Old Testament concept, it's not for the New Testament believer.

Many feel that the idea of fearing the Lord is a negative one – because we always associate fear with negativity and danger. So they never mention it. They focus on what seems positive – at least to them – and neglect to teach the vital doctrine of the fear of the Lord.

In this four-part series, I'm going to teach on the fear of the Lord – what it is, and how it will manifest itself in your life, according to the Bible. But first I'll make a statement to you: Without the fear of the Lord – your Christian life will never go anywhere, you'll never grow in holiness, you'll never understand more of the Word, and you'll never love the Lord properly.

Loving God is the first commandment – but you'll never love God unless you know what it is to fear Him. People today do speak on the love of God, but I want to show you that a real love for God – a real joy, pleasure and fulfilment in the character of God – will only come through the fear of the Lord. Fearing God is going to be the source of joy and happiness in your life.

Fearing God is commanded, commended and Christlike

Yes – even in the New Testament, in **Ephesians 5:21**, **1 Peter 2:17** and **2 Corinthians 7:1**. The Old Testament commands you to fear the Lord at least 14 times directly, and many other times indirectly. Not only is the fear of the Lord commanded, it's commended:

- **Proverbs 1:7** tells us it's the beginning of knowledge.
- **Proverbs 9:10** tells us the beginning of wisdom.
- **Proverbs 10:27** tells us that the fear of the Lord prolongs days.
- **Proverbs 14:26** tells us it brings strong confidence.

- **Proverbs 14:27** tells us it's a fountain of life.
- **Proverbs 19:23** tells us it tends to life.
- **Proverbs 31** tells us the woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.

It's commanded, it's commended, and it's also Christlike. Our Lord Jesus feared the Lord! That might sound almost contradictory, but God the Son feared God the Father when He was incarnate. **Hebrews 5:7** speaks of Christ, saying, *"Who in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared..."*

Isaiah 11:2-3 also predicts the spirit Jesus would have: *"And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord; and shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord."*

I don't think there are many verses which are as direct about a human's priority on this earth as **Ecclesiastes 12:13**: *"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man."*

Similarly, **Deuteronomy 10:12-13** says, *"And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, to keep the commandments of the Lord, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?"*

If we do not know what the fear of the Lord is, the Bible says we are missing out on our whole purpose. So clearly, this is a priority. It's something God commands. It is our very design instructions as humans. Our Lord Jesus modelled it before us. It is the key to real life, joy, wisdom and honour. This is the basis of fulfilling the greatest commandment – to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul and mind. So what is it?

What is the fear of the Lord?

To understand the fear of the Lord, turn to **Genesis 28:10-22**. Here we find Jacob the schemer, on the move to escape the vengeance of Esau for tricking him out of his birthright. He settles down to sleep, and dreams. However, this is not the kind of dream you and I have. This is a vision of God in the night.

In God's revelation to him, Jacob sees a ladder reaching into heaven, with the angels descending and ascending. He then sees the Lord Himself above it. Notice the word, *"behold"* in the text – which the Bible uses to say, 'stop and take notice here.' The great and mighty God reveals Himself to Jacob, and graciously promises to bless Jacob unconditionally.

Then Jacob wakes up. He does not say, "What a strange dream." He says, *"Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not."* Jacob had set up camp, oblivious to the presence of the

Lord. He had carried on as if God existed, but just not in this place. Now the very presence of God becomes so real to him, that he blurts out – surely God is here, and I did not realise it!

Then listen to his next statement: *“How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”* The Bible says he was afraid. Jacob realised God was here – and something about God caused him fear. You may say, well, the fear of the Lord is not a terrified fear – it’s reverence. But let’s see what the Bible says.

Sometimes it is that. But to understand the entire concept we can’t edit out the things we’re uncomfortable with. Jacob was afraid. He didn’t just feel deep respect. He felt scared. Why did He feel scared?

Jacob recognised the presence of a power far greater than himself. He realised he was in the presence of One who could destroy him or keep him alive, save him or condemn him, help him or harm him. In those moments when he saw God – he realised something that had been true all along, but he hadn’t consciously thought of it: God is here – God is powerful.

The presence and the power of God had not suddenly arrived. They were there all the time. That’s why Jacob says – *“And I knew it not.”* God was always there– it was Jacob’s rebellion and unbelief that caused him to blind. Now, he realised how foolish he had been.

It’s the feeling you would have if you had been loudly announcing how brave and strong you are, and suddenly realise that the guns of a number of soldiers have been trained on you for the past five minutes. You suddenly go quiet. Their presence, and their power to take your life, humble you. They’ve been there a while; they could have taken your life at any time, but it’s only now that you realise it – that’s what is scary about it.

Jacob came to realise that he was in the presence of a powerful God, and it caused a reaction. He did not turn over and carry on sleeping. He did not say a stale spiritual cliché and carry on with his life. He realised ‘God is here.’ The God I have been disobeying with my life. The God whose laws I have been flaunting.

This is the God who I have been ignoring in my thoughts. The God who I have not so much as said a prayer to the whole day. The God who holds my life in His hand. The One who made these powerful glorious angels. He is here. He has been looking over my shoulder every moment. He has been reading my thoughts, listening to my words, watching me, sparing me all along.

So what was his reaction? And Jacob rose up early in the morning, took the stone that he had used as a pillow, set it up as a pillar, poured oil on it and made a vow. His encounter with God caused the correct reaction in him. This is the fear of the Lord. It is when we come to realise the presence of God, and the power of God – His Person, and then react to that presence and Person in certain ways.

I have experienced one earthquake, one typhoon and many incredible thunderstorms. The effect such powerful weather and natural phenomena has on a person is to become suddenly aware of the presence of things greater than yourself. You are confronted with a threat and humbled in the face of it. You realise that you are at risk. There is a terrible sense of vulnerability. You know this power could take your life.

Consider even the fear of man. You're driving on the highway and doing what you shouldn't be doing – speeding. Then you see a traffic cop sitting on the side of the road. What do you do? You change your behaviour. His presence – which you hadn't seen before when you were speeding – has now affected you. His power – in the form of the ability to fine you, or even arrest you – and if worst comes to worst, shoot you – this power causes you to slow down. His presence and power change your behaviour.

We can also say it positively. You find yourself somehow at the receiving end of someone's road rage. They are tailgating you – almost ramming you from behind – and you can see them cursing you. They've clearly lost control and are recklessly endangering their own and your life. You begin to get afraid.

The next thing you see is a traffic cop drive up beside you with his lights on, get on the loudspeaker and signal to the road-rager to pull over. That same presence and power is now a great source of comfort to you. You revere and respect them as much as you did before, only now you are under their protection, not their prosecution. It just depends which side of the law you are on.

It's the same with the fear of the Lord. Realising His great power and His presence affects you. Depending on what you're doing, and where you stand with God – this should cause you terror or comfort. Both are the fear of the Lord. And you see this in Scripture a number of times – the reaction after God clearly displays Himself.

After the parting of the Red Sea, it says the people feared the Lord. God's intervention had made them realise that God is here. He is a reality. He is. In 1 Samuel we find Israel being rebuked by Samuel for choosing a king. He tells them it will rain, as a sign of God's displeasure on them. It happens, and we find the people feared the lord. They suddenly realise they are in the presence of the very One they had rejected.

When the sailors who throw Jonah over the board find that the storm calms down the minute he is thrown out, they feared the Lord greatly, because suddenly God was a reality to them. When the darkness and the signs accompanying the crucifixion took place – what does the Bible say about the centurion? It says he feared and said, *"Truly this man was the Son of God"* (**Matthew 27:54**).

The fear of the Lord is when we realise that we are in the Presence of such a mighty Person. We realise the incredible glory, power and authority of such a person. We realise that He could take our lives. But if we're in Christ, we balance it with the thought that this mighty, mighty God chooses to love us.

As that awesome contrast grips your soul – that the uncreated God whose wrath can melt the mountains chooses to smile upon you as a believer – you experience the fear of the Lord. **The fear of the Lord is correctly reacting to who God is, all the time.** That's because God is always here. The fear of the Lord is the glory of God affecting you in the details of life.

If the fear of the Lord is when we realise God is here, and what that implies, then consider, what was Jacob's problem? Was it that God was not there previously? Was it that God was not mighty previously? No, God was always there, and He was always mighty. The problem was Jacob's lack of sensitivity to that fact.

The problem was that Jacob did not become still and realise He is God. Jacob also made the mistake of thinking God was localised. His hard heart still thought that God resided in particular places – and he had stumbled upon a place that God stayed in. He didn't realise God is always here. God was going to be with him as he laboured under Laban, as he travelled back, and in all places.

Jacob was a self-sufficient schemer. He did not like to stop and consider that he owed his life and breath to someone else. He liked the idea that he was his own leader, a self-made man. God graciously steps in to open his eyes. Similarly, think of Balaam whipping his poor donkey, which halted when it saw the angel of the Lord. Balaam couldn't see the angel, who had been there all along. God had to open his eyes so he could see. Stubborn self-determined pride does not see God standing right there.

Jacob's hard heart opened to the fundamental truth that lies at the heart of the fear of the Lord: God is here. Have you ever stopped to think about the implications of that?

The One who is so Ancient that the angels made before man are like infants compared to Him – He is here. The One who the Bible says is the Shepherd of the stars – stars we have not even seen, and never will, since His universe is so vast – the One who made these in one day and named them all – He is here.

The One who is so beautiful that the seraphim cannot continue to stare at Him, they cover their eyes – He is here. The One whose voice is compared to the thundering roar of water, who when He steps on the Mount of Olives, it will split in two simply because of the holy foot of the Creator – He is here. The One who hates sin so intensely that He created an eternal hell, that He will not ever close or do away with – He is here. The One who loves man so much that He died in our place – He is here.

The reason Jacob did not fear the Lord is the same reason we do not – hardness of heart. We refuse to allow the truth of God's reality to intrude upon our day. We push it out our minds. It becomes a habit for us to think of life apart from God as the main idea. And to not think of life as having God very present in every situation – this is being out of touch with reality.

This is like a man who in the middle of a shootout in the streets, put on his clothes, gets his briefcase, and walks out the door as if nothing is happening. We'd say such a man is ignoring the reality of what is going on around him. Well, any human that lives life as if God does not exist is ignoring the greatest reality of all: God is – He does not merely exist – but He is here.

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

Hebrews 11:6

Imagine how practicing the presence of God would affect us. Before you look at that evil scene on TV or on the Internet, you think, 'God is here.' At the start of what seems like an argument with your spouse, you think, 'God is here.' When you are driving and are cut off by that driver, you think, 'God is here.' When you are simply walking by yourself, and busy worrying, fretting, pouting or otherwise, you think, 'God is here.'

Paul tells servants they should not be men-pleasers, serving with lip service but fearing the Lord. In other words, they should remember that even if no boss is watching, God is. In **Leviticus 19:14** we read: *"Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but shalt fear thy God: I am the LORD."* The deaf cannot hear you curse, the blind cannot see you trip them, but God can.

Proverbs 15:3 says, *The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.* Before cutting corners at work, before gossiping about another person, before wasting time, before skipping your quiet time, before, during and after everything – we think – God is here. That's what fearing God means.

Sometimes we think God's presence like air in the room instead of like a Person, so we don't change. Adam thought he could hide from God, but God is never physically further away from us at one time than any other time. It is our spiritual sensitivity that is sharp or dull. Fearing the Lord is when we are sensitive to His Presence and Power at all times. David understood this when he wrote **Psalms 139**.

You say, we can't really think about that all the time! Well, the Bible certainly suggests you ought to make the thought of God the majority of your thoughts. If not the conscious thought, then definitely the background thought – the thought that leans over all other thoughts.

This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to.

Joshua 1:8

Let not thine heart envy sinners: But be thou in the fear of the LORD all the day long.

Proverbs 23:17

Now, how do we get the fear of the Lord? There are two problems. One, we don't think about God as being here for every situation. Then, when we do, we don't think of how awesome He is, so we don't react correctly. The answer to problem number one is to be sensitive to the Spirit. The answer to problem number two is be saturated with the Scriptures.

1. Be sensitive to the Spirit

Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

Philippians 2:12-13

We are to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. He is the one who works in us. He creates the desire to please God, and gives you the power to please God. But we must work with His working. He works in you, and you must work that inside work out. How? With fear and trembling. The Holy Spirit is going to bring to your mind a sense of God's presence. You don't get the fear of the Lord by trying to conjure it up inside you. You allow the Spirit to work it in you, and then you work it out.

How will the Spirit work it in you? He'll be prompting you all day to consider that God is here. God is powerful. God is real and in this place. You respond by not squashing those thoughts, but by meditating on them. By allowing those thoughts to become the backdrop of all your other thoughts. By allowing the lenses you view the world with to be coloured with the thought that God is here.

At school, I used to have cadets once a week. That was where you learnt to march and do various drills as a company or as a battalion. Well, the key to marching is to stay in step with the commanders call. You cannot choose your own rhythm to march to.

Galatians 5:25 says, *"If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit."* That word 'walk' literally means 'get in step.' Get in step with the Spirit. March to His rhythm. Cooperate with Him. Be sensitive to what He says.

This is not mystic dreams, but the prompting of the Spirit of God using the Word of God. The inner conviction that causes to turn and behold God. The Spirit of God is portrayed in the Bible as gentle. He lighted upon Christ as a dove, not as a lion. He spoke to Elijah in a still, small voice, not a booming roar.

That does not mean the Spirit is weak, it means He is powerful, but speaks to those who quiet down enough to hear. God tells the man who cares. If God the Spirit speaks softly, we need to be sensitive. We need to have the consistent attitude of Samuel: *"Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."* So make it a habit to practice continually letting your thoughts come back to the idea that God is here.

2. Be saturated with the Scriptures

My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; so that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.

Proverbs 2:1-5.

Notice all the verbs in this passage. This is not a 5-minute hit and run attitude toward the Word. This is not a once-a-week devotional. This is a hunger for God in the Word. This is a cry to know Him more. What will be the result of going to the Bible with a hunger for the knowledge of God? Verse 5 says: understanding the fear of the Lord and finding knowledge of Him.

See, the Spirit does not work on a vacuum. You will hear His prompting voice in proportion to the desire of your heart to feed on the Scriptures. He will remind you of the presence of God by using the Word that He wrote. You eat it, and He'll cause you to digest it and gain spiritual energy from it.

Here's the other reason we need to be saturated with the Scriptures. In the Scriptures we find who God really is. See, you might make a habit of thinking God is here – but if you don't know who He is, then that won't affect you at all. You will hardly be moved. It will be as impressive to you as if anyone else was here. But once you grow in the understanding of the Person and Power of God – the fact that He is here will change your behaviour.

No one in Scripture who truly saw God carried on as usual. The Israelites quaked with fear and begged Moses to rather be their representative. Isaiah cried out, "I am ruined!" Ezekiel fell down like he was dead. Daniel felt he had no life left in him. John fell at His feet as dead. Peter, James and John fell flat on their faces. No one who for even an instant understood or beheld God's glory remained the same.

You may say, well, they saw magnificent visions, I don't get those. The answer to that is that God's glory is seen by the soul. Peter cried out, "*Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man*" (**Luke 5:8**) not because He saw Christ in His glory. Jesus was still in a wet, smelly fishing boat, in very ordinary circumstances. But there and then, Peter understood who was in his presence – who Jesus was – and reacted to that.

Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. The Word is the fuel for Spirit illumination of Christ. Therefore the key is to be sensitive to the Spirit, and be saturated with the Scriptures.

There's another word for the fear of the Lord: humility. And another: faith. In fact, I believe the New Testament equivalent of fearing the Lord is being filled with the Spirit. Being filled with the Spirit is reacting to God's presence by submitting to Him, depending on Him, confessing your sins before Him. Fearing the Lord is the same. Fearing the Lord,

humility, faith and being filled with the Spirit – this is the foundation of everything else in the Christian life. It starts by bringing God into the picture at all times.