

The Fear of the Lord

by Bryan Gibson

What does it mean to fear the Lord? Many people answer this way: “It means to be in awe of Him, to have reverence for Him.” It’s hard to argue with that, especially when you consider these two passages from the Psalms. “Let all the earth fear the Lord; Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him” (Psalms 33:8). “Fear” and “stand in awe of Him” appear to be used interchangeably here. “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be held in reverence by all those around Him” (Psalms 89:7). So we certainly can’t quibble with those who use the word reverence to explain the fear of the Lord.

It would be a mistake, though, to stop with these two passages. Other passages help us to see the whole truth. To fear God is to also fear what He will do to those who disobey Him. Start reading in Genesis and keep reading, right on through the New Testament—you can’t help but tremble at the fierceness of His wrath, directed against those who disobey His will. Read carefully these words of Jesus in Matthew 10:28: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell.” Consider also Hebrews 10:31: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God.” If that’s not enough to sober us up, look at this warning: “Because of unbelief they (Jews) were broken off, and you (Gentiles) stand by faith.” Do not be haughty but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off” (Romans 11:20-22). If that doesn’t make us tremble, we need to go back and read it again.

This fear of the Lord actually breeds confidence, as strange as that may sound. Look at these words: “In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence, and his children will have a place of refuge. The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death” (Proverbs 14:26-27). Fear of the Lord steers us away from the “snares of death,” teaches us to “hate evil” (Proverbs 8:13), and keeps us in the pathway of God. Those who fear the Lord, when they do sin, will immediately repent and seek His forgiveness. They have seen the “repent...or else” warnings (Revelation 2:5, 16), and they sure don’t like the “or else” part. So fear is really a healthy thing—it keeps us in the “straight and narrow;” it drives us back to God, who is our “place of refuge.” All of this serves to give us greater confidence in our salvation.

Some complain about preachers in the past who preached nothing but “fire and brimstone” lessons, emphasizing the fear of the Lord. I don’t know how true that is, but perhaps today we have swung to the other extreme. Some talk almost exclusively about the love of God, implying that this should be our sole motivation. While this may become the primary motivation for a mature Christian, he dare not lose sight of the other. Fear of the Lord (with all its facets) is a great motivator, too. Consider the goodness AND the severity of the Lord.