

THE MEANING OF THE FEAR OF THE LORD

Genesis 2:15-17

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

Proverbs 8:13

The fear of the LORD is to hate evil...

In our first booklet of this series, we considered the subject of the IMPORTANCE OF THE FEAR OF THE LORD. We took a quick journey from Genesis to Revelation to see that God's word is perfectly clear that God commands each of us to fear Him. We considered two things that the fear of the Lord is not. It is not:

1. Simply a reverence and awe of God - When God wants to use the word fear he uses fear and when God wants to use the word reverence, he uses reverence.
2. Just an OT concept. Indeed, we looked at a number of New Testament references, including some from the mouth of Jesus Christ Himself. These references teach that the fear of the Lord is still necessary for us in our day, as well as that which will be present throughout all eternity.

The point of the first booklet was this--God's Word places great importance on the fear of God. Therefore, if you do not have a true fear of God in your life, you do not have Biblical Christianity.

We did not, however, define biblically what it means to fear the Lord. This booklet is written with that purpose in mind. We will examine God's Word to understand the meaning of the fear of the Lord. Let us begin by remembering that Satan has one goal in mind for every human being, to keep them from the knowledge and the fear of God. He will try anything he can to cause mankind not to know and fear God, because when a man truly knows God, he will also fear God. Satan knows full well that if a man fears God, that man will also obey God. Therefore, Satan seeks to give man a false sense of security, to remove any fear of God's judgments from man's thinking. When Eve was tempted by the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Eve stated that God promised death for eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent responded by saying, "Ye shall not surely die." (Genesis 3:4) In other words, you don't need to fear God. He won't bring judgment upon you. In fact, He knows if you eat of it, you will become just like Him. And with two short sentences the serpent deceived Eve into believing that God did not need to be

feared. The serpent stated that no such judgment of death would ever come upon Eve.

Let us pause and ask ourselves, have we taken seriously the judgments of God? God's Word says in Ezekiel 18:20, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." The New Testament is filled with warnings that if men practice sin, they will not inherit the kingdom of God (see Galatians 5:19-21; I Corinthians 6:9-10). Unfortunately, many of today's preachers do not agree. Instead they teach that all you have to do is "accept Christ" and then you never have to fear God again. They fail to preach the necessity of, and the Biblical meaning of, repentance. As a result, multitudes of people have "accepted Christ" but continue on with the practice of sin in their life. They are convinced that since they "prayed the sinner's prayer" they need not fear God any more. Joseph Alleine, who lived during the 1600's, dealt with the same error in his day. He wrote the following in his book entitled An Alarm To The Unconverted (also titled, A Sure Guide To Heaven).

Christianity is more than a name. If we will hear Paul, it does not lie in word, but in power (1 Cor. 4:20)...Are there not many that name the name of the Lord Jesus, that do not depart from iniquity (II Timothy 2:19), and profess they know God, but in works they deny Him? (Titus 1:16). And will God receive these for true converts? What! converts from sin when they still live in sin? It is a visible contradiction.

Salvation is viewed today as fire insurance by some, as an escape route by others. These same preachers who teach we must "accept Christ" fail to teach their hearers the command of Proverbs 23:17, "be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long." Just as in the garden of Eden, the tempter still uses the same lie today, "ye shall not surely die." However, God's Word is plain. In Romans 6:23, the Apostle Paul warns the saints at Rome, "The wages of sin is death." Paul's point is clear in Romans 6, if you yield your members as instruments of sin, YOU WILL DIE! The issue is not whether a man makes a profession of faith in Christ, the issue is whether a man is being saved from, delivered from his sin. That is why the Apostle John wrote in I John 3:7-8, "Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil." The Apostle Paul also gives this same warning in Galatians 6:7-8. He writes, "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting." These warnings, written to the believers, are the means by which God keeps His children from living in sin. The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 19:9,11, "...the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether...moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward."

Let us begin then, to examine what it means to fear the Lord. There are three aspects to a Biblical understanding of the fear of the Lord. First, A DREAD AND TERROR WHICH IS FOUNDED ON A WHOLEHEARTED BELIEF THAT GOD WILL CARRY OUT HIS JUDGMENTS AGAINST SIN. Second, A REVERENCE AND AWE WHICH IS INSPIRED BY THE GREATNESS OF GOD, and third, A HATRED FOR EVIL WHICH IS PRODUCED BY KNOWING GOD'S HATRED FOR SIN.

DREAD AND TERROR

The first aspect of the fear of the Lord that we will consider is this; a dread and terror which is founded on a wholehearted belief that God will carry out his judgments against sin. Those who do not believe in Jesus Christ are void of this dread and terror. They live for themselves and serve their own pleasures, yet they are not afraid of God's judgment on them for their sin. Some are too busy (they say) to think about God, others don't believe the Bible is God's Word, and still others have been deceived into thinking that once you have professed faith in Christ, you don't need to fear God anymore. Yet consider David, the King of Israel. David is described in the Bible as a man after God's own heart. In Psalm 119:120, David writes, "My flesh trembleth for fear of thee, and I am afraid of thy judgments." Surely David was not wrong for thinking this way. Rather, it was this holy fear of God and His judgments that kept David walking in obedience. There can be no doubt that David failed to walk in this fear for a time, and as a result, committed horrible sin beginning with his sin with Bathsheba. It was at the coming of Nathan the prophet that David was again brought to a dread and terror of God's judgment. In his prayer of repentance in Psalm 51, David prays, "Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy Holy Spirit from me."

Another example of this dread and terror can be seen in the life of Job. In Job 1:1 and 1:8, Job is described as a man that "feared God." Although Job was a godly man, he did not cast off any fear of God's judgment. In fact, the opposite is true. When recounting his reason for obeying God in Job 31, he clearly states in verse 23, "For destruction from God was a terror to me, and by reason of his highness I could not endure."

We also see this fear of God as characteristic of the early church. In Acts 5:11, after the death of Ananias and Sapphira for their sin, the Bible says, "and great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things." Again, in Acts 9:31, the churches are described as "walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost..."

Does this mean that you have to go around with your bodies trembling at the fear of God's judgment. If you have not repented of your sin and believed on Jesus Christ, you ought to! God's Word says in John 3:36, "he that believeth not the Son, shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him." The phrase "believeth not" in this verse means to disobey. If you are not walking in obedience to Jesus Christ, you ought to fear the judgment of God, regardless of any profession you have made. If however, you are a disciple, a follower of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven and washed in the blood of Jesus Christ. According to I John 1:7, if you are walking in the light, as He (Jesus) is in the light, then the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses you from all sin! The question you must ask yourself is if you are walking in the light as Jesus walked in the light? If not, then your assurance of forgiveness is a false assurance, and you ought to tremble at the judgment of God. If you are walking in the light, then you need not be terrified or fearful of God's judgment falling on you now. However, this doesn't mean you rid yourself of the terror of His judgments. As a Christian you should live with the knowledge that if you turn to living a life of willful sin, God's judgment will fall upon you. Hebrews 10:26-31 warns us of this.

Let me clarify by explaining this in terms we know. I would guess that almost everyone lives in the fear and trembling of certain aspects of our government. The judgment our government may impose if you are convicted of 1st degree murder is the death penalty. Now take a man who has committed 1st degree murder, and who has been convicted of his crime. He awaits the death penalty. That man lives in the fear and dread that one day he will be put to death for his

crime. Now he may not think about it very much, but when he does, if he has any conscience left, he will have thoughts of fear and dread of that day. Now consider another man, your average citizen, you and I. We also ought to live in the fear and dread of that judgment, and I would guess that every one of us does. Does that mean that we walk around fearful that every policeman is going to come up and arrest us and put us to death? Of course not! We have not committed the crime so we need not be gripped with fear every time we see a policeman. But we ought to always have a fear that if we ever do commit murder, we also will receive the death penalty. That fear of judgment will keep you from committing the crime. Now I said that every one of you probably walks in the fear of this judgment all day long. It is not something you always think about, but you always have it in the back of your mind. It helps keep you from pulling out a gun when you are upset on the highway and shooting the driver that cut you off. I would go on and say, that if you ever found yourself pointing a gun at someone who made you angry and you didn't have grounds to shoot him, you would literally fear and tremble. Why? Because you know judgment would come upon you! Now the problem in our day is that this judgment is often not carried out. And even when it is, it is so long after the crime, most criminals don't fear the judgment anymore. Likewise, many Bible teachers today teach that once you make a profession of faith in Christ, you don't ever have to fear God's judgment because regardless of how you live, God can't cast you away! Yet what a lie it is. Now read carefully, lest you misunderstand what I'm about to say. God will never cast away a true child of His, but not every one who claims to be a child of God really is. In fact, even among the readers of this booklet, there may be many who call themselves Christians, but they still practice their sin. You may be one who desires to overcome a particular sin, you may even feel terrible when you commit the sin, but if you still live in the practice of that sin, you ought to fear the judgment of God! Remember the words of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 5:6-7. "Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. Be not ye therefore partakers with them." Yes, as believers we ought to fear the judgments of God falling upon us, if we commit the things others do. After all, isn't this why Paul warns in his epistles that we are not to be deceived?

Consider this, I fear laying down on the railroad tracks and falling asleep. Why? Because I know that if a train comes and runs me over, I will be killed. You fear putting your hand on a hot stove, because you know you will burn your hand. You fear climbing up a ten story building and jumping off because you know what the result will be. Although you don't walk around trembling every moment at those consequences, yet you live in the fear of them. But if I could convince you that no train would come, if I could remove your fear of being hit by a train, then I can get you to lie down and sleep in the tracks. Likewise, God's Word is clear, He will judge sin! But many teachers of our day would convince us that if you have accepted Jesus, you will never be judged for your sin, regardless of how you live, even if that means you continue in your sin.

So we see that a true fear of God will keep us from sin. As we recognize that God judges sin, we are kept from living in sin. A holy fear of God will produce holiness in the life of the believer. Consider this, a proper fear of snakes is good. I may not be afraid of snakes, but if I see a poisonous snake in my bed, should I say, "I'm not afraid of snakes, I'll just lay here and go to sleep." Of course not! That would be insanity! A proper fear of snakes is good; it will help keep me from being bitten.

Before we move on, I urge you to honestly examine your own heart. Do you have this fear, this dread and terror that if you turn from the LORD and live to please yourself, God's judgments will fall on you? Or have you been deceived by the vain philosophy of our day that says, "I'm a Christian, God won't judge me for the sins I still love! I know I shouldn't do this sin, but God understands I am weak, he will forgive me!" God pity any who have been deceived into believing this lie of Satan. Remember, Hebrews 10:26-31 says:

For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

To sin willfully is to habitually practice any sin. If you are continuing to practice sin in your life, excusing it rather than forsaking it, you are urged to repent and cry out to God for mercy. If you are a true child of God, He will give you deliverance. Do not accept your sin and think you are unable to overcome. "Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it" (I Thessalonians 5:24).

REVERENCE AND AWE

The second aspect concerning the fear of the Lord that we will consider, is the reverence and awe which is inspired by the greatness of God. Both of these aspects must be present for there to be a Biblical fear of the Lord. Now as I said at the beginning of this booklet, the fear of the Lord is not simply a reverence and awe of God, although it is contained in a true fear of the Lord. The problem we run into here, is that most people don't understand reverence and awe. We live in a day when if you shake the hand of an athlete who makes twenty million dollars a year, most people think that what they feel at that moment is reverence and awe. That is far cry from both the biblical meaning AS WELL AS the dictionary meaning. Let's begin by looking at the meaning of the words reverence and awe as defined by Webster's 1828 dictionary.

Reverence: fear mingled with respect and esteem

Awe: fear mingled with adoration or reverence; dread inspired by something great.

To apply these terms to a professional athlete shows us the corrupt condition of our society. Let's look at a few biblical examples of true reverence and awe. Moses stood before the burning bush in Exodus 3:1-6. We are told that Moses hid his face; "for he was afraid to look upon God." Now he wasn't necessarily afraid

because he believed God's judgment was about to fall upon him for a particular sin, but rather he was afraid because of the greatness of this burning bush and the Great God who caused it not to be consumed. In other words, he was afraid out of reverence and awe of God. But this fear, which is the same word for dread and terror, was due to God's greatness. Many people think that they properly fear God because in their minds they attribute some type of reverence to Him. That are convinced that since they think of God as 'awesome', they have a true fear of Him. Yet James corrects this thinking when he writes in James 2:19, "...the devils also believe, and tremble." Don't think that because you have some respect for God that you fear Him in a Biblical way. Consider also Moses' reaction to God's presence at Sinai, described in Hebrews 12:21. "And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, 'I exceedingly fear and quake.'" Again this fear was one of reverence and awe at the mighty power of God. Literally, Moses was saying, and I quote Strong's concordance, "frightened out of one's wits."

To have reverence and awe for God is to be frightened at His very presence, because of His greatness! Consider two verses from the book of Psalms. Psalm 96:4, "For the Lord is great, and greatly to be praised: he is to be feared above all gods." Also, in Psalm 119:120, which we considered earlier, we see both of these aspects, the fear of reverence and the fear of God's judgment, "My flesh trembleth for fear of thee, and I am afraid of thy judgments."

Before we move on to our last point, let us once again examine ourselves. Do you have this reverence and awe of God that causes you to fear Him? Do you see the need to fear as David when he said, "My flesh trembleth for fear of thee, and I am afraid of thy judgments"? Do you understand the greatness of God and fear before Him?

HATRED FOR EVIL

The third aspect of the fear of the Lord we will consider is a hatred for evil which is produced by knowing God's hatred for sin. This third aspect is the necessary result of the first two aspects. In other words, if the first two aspects of dread and terror because of God's judgment, and reverence and awe because of God's greatness, don't produce a hatred for sin, you do not have a biblical fear of God! All three aspects, or ingredients, must be present to be considered the true fear of the Lord. Proverbs 8:13 tells us that "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate."

Just as a cake mix can have many dry ingredients in it, but unless you add water, you will never get it to come together to be an edible cake! So it is possible for one to have this reverence and awe based on God's greatness, and this dread and terror based on God's judgment for sin, and still not biblically fear the LORD. An example of this is found in Exodus 15:14-16. This is part of Moses' song after crossing the Red Sea about how God would deliver His people from their enemies. In these verses it describes what the heathen nations would do, at the hearing of God's mighty hand.

The people shall hear and be afraid...trembling shall take hold upon them...fear and dread shall fall upon them; by the greatness of thine arm shall they be as still as a stone...

Yet we know that these nations did not turn from their sin. They had fear and dread, reverence and awe, but they never hated evil! What is your condition before the Lord? Do you hate evil? Isaiah's prophecy of the coming Messiah in Isaiah 11:1-5 reveals that the "Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD" would be on Christ. Notice also how God the Father describes His Son in Hebrews 1:9, "thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity." Christ hated all iniquity, or sin. That is why the Apostle Paul commands the saints in Romans 12:9, "abhor that which is evil." To abhor means to hate extremely, to detest. The question for each of us is this, do we hate evil?

Now there is a great misunderstanding concerning the hatred for sin today. Many who teach the Bible today teach that if when you sin, you feel guilty, that is evidence that you are a true believer. They say that an unbeliever wouldn't feel guilty about sin. And so multitudes of professing Christians continue on in their sin, comforted by the fact that they feel guilty when they sin. But we must see that there is a difference between feeling guilty because of our sin, and hating our sin. This became clear to me some years ago. I professed Christ when I was 16. At that time I "accepted the Lord." However, I was never taught biblical repentance, and so I continued on with the practice of sin in my heart. Outwardly I cleaned things up, but the inside was still the same in many ways. I took comfort in the fact that when I sinned, I felt guilty and ashamed. But I continued in the same sins year after year. Then God in His mercy showed me, I had never really repented, I never hated the sin, I only hated the consequences of the sin. I hated the feelings of guilt, the feeling of failure, and the feelings of shame, but I still loved the sin! The fact that I still loved the sin was evident because I still practiced the sin. I began to see that when I was doing the sin, I actually enjoyed it very much. I didn't hate the sin, I hated the consequences! Now there are consequences, judgments for sin. And we ought to fear those judgments. But we need to understand why those judgments will come upon sin, and that is because God hates sin. When we repent with true repentance, we will not only fear the judgment of God against sin, but we will also hate the sin itself. That is the essence of the fear of the Lord.

I believe the one reason we don't fear the Lord as we should is because we don't see sin as bad as it is! We excuse it as natural; we compare ourselves with ourselves. We are taught that as Christians, sin is common, and we just have to live with it. That is the lie that Israel believed about the enemies in the land that God had given to them. Israel considered these enemies as too powerful and did not drive them out as God commanded. Eventually, those very enemies overcame Israel and took them slaves. So it is today, if you tolerate sin and think it is too powerful to get rid of, one day you will be taken captive by it and made slaves to it.

The question we need to consider in light of God's Word is this--do we hate evil? If you are struggling with a sin and can't seem to get victory over it, do you hate it? Or do you just hate the guilt and shame you feel after you commit it? I dare say that the reason many people don't walk in victory is because they don't hate the sins they struggle with. If you hate it, you would cry out as David to keep you from it. You would constantly pray, as Jesus taught, to be delivered from evil, and in particular, the sin you struggle with. But ask yourself, how much time have you spent crying out for victory over a difficult sin in your life? Many just expect God to take their sin away, but how few are willing to seek His face diligently asking Him to empower them over sin. James 5:16 says that the "effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." I believe it avails much in regard to freedom from sin. But many have just tolerated their sin. Oh, you may feel bad, and you may even confess it with the words of I John 1:9, but if you don't hate your sin, and if you don't forsake it, forgiveness is not promised to you! Proverbs 28:13 says, He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy." Do you take the attitude Jesus did toward sin when he taught in Matthew 5:29-30, that if your right eye or right hand causes you to sin, pluck it out and cut it off?

Instead, today's attitude toward sin is seen everywhere. Bumper stickers that casually pass over sin and excuse it with the words, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." Others excuse their sin by saying, "I'm just human," or "it's my old nature acting up." Still further, we see the attitude toward sin reflected in the attitude toward judgment. In our day we dare not condemn something as sinful, because after all, "nobody is perfect."

Unfortunately this attitude is now commonplace in most "so called" churches. Most churches are willing to condemn abortion, and sodomy, and drunkenness, and blasphemy. But how few condemn the sins common within the churches: pride, anger, lust of the eyes, bitterness, envy, strife, disobedience to parents, selfishness, loving pleasure more than loving God. And how about the sins of omission: prayerlessness, failure to diligently study God's word, unthankfulness, failure to give thanks in everything! How we need to humble ourselves before the LORD and seek His mercy! We need to hate all sin, as David said. Not only the outward sins, but also the inward sins. Not only sin, but also anything that is contrary to God's way!

Psalms 119:128 Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way.

Do you hate every false way? Do you hate any teaching that is contrary to the way of truth? Do you hate any doctrine that is not according to godliness? We ought not to tolerate the false teachings of today. We ought to hate the doctrines of false religions, we ought to hate the doctrines of Mormonism, and Buddhism, and 'easy believism', and 'carnal christianity.' Why? Because God hates those teachings!

Unfortunately, that is not the view in these days. Listen to what one of the leading evangelists of our day has said concerning other ways to God:

I fully adhere to the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith for myself and my ministry. But as an American I respect other paths to God--and as a Christian I am called on to love them.

How contrary to the plain teaching of the Bible! To make such a statement is to call Jesus Christ a liar. Jesus said in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." We are not called on to love other paths to God! We are to hate EVERY false way!

Do you fear the LORD? Are you afraid to sin against God? Do you have a hatred for sin? Do you hate every false way? Or have you allowed yourself to become a hearer of the word, and not a doer, deceiving you own self? Let us consider the account from John 8 of the woman taken in adultery. If you remember the woman was caught in the very act of adultery and taken before Jesus to be condemned. After Jesus wrote something in the dirt, all of the woman's accusers left. Notice Jesus' words to the woman in verse 11. He said to her, "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more." What if this woman went away saying, "Jesus forgave me, no matter what I do, I know I am forgiven!" How dreadful it would be for this woman on the day of judgment if she went back to her adultery on the basis of having received Christ's forgiveness.

Oh reader, have you been forgiven? Then don't return to your sin again! Cry out to the Lord for power, and remember these words from Paul in Romans 8:13, "If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live." Christ's forgiveness is assured only to those who walk in the light, even as He is in the light. And if we walk in the light, we will be like the early churches, which walked in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Ghost. John Murray wrote, "The essence of impiety is not to be afraid of God when there is reason to be afraid of God." May God grant us to have a true fear of Him, for without it, we do not have Biblical Christianity!

For Further Study:* **Warnings Given To The Saints*

Romans 1:18
Romans 11:20-22
Galatians 5:19-21
Colossians 3:5-7
1 Timothy 4:16
2 Timothy 2:11-13
Hebrews 6:1-8
James 2:13-17
2 Peter 2:1-8
Jude 5

Romans 6:16
1 Corinthians 6:9-10
Galatians 6:7-8
2 Thes. 1:7-10
1 Timothy 6:9-12
Hebrews 2:1-3
Hebrews 10:26-31
James 4:4
2 Peter 3:10-14
Revelation 2 and 3

Romans 8:13
1 Cor. 9:27-10:12
Ephesians 5:5-7
2 Thes. 2:10-12
1 Timothy 6:20-21
Hebrews 3:12-4:1
James 1:22-27
1 Peter 4:17-18
1 John