

The **FEAR** of the Lord

by Johan D.Tangelder

Why should we care about God? Do we only picture God as our friend, our biggest fan? Do we give God any thought as we go about our daily business? Or are we tempted to live as if God's existence doesn't really matter? In short, are we tempted to be practical atheists? These are pertinent questions we should address. Technology and modern science act as if God's existence is largely irrelevant. Modern people are so preoccupied with mastering the world that God seems disinterested or not there. There is an obsession with self-realization, self-gratification, self-glorification, and a commitment to the human potential. Individual spiritual experience has assumed the place of the Holy Scriptures. Self-help books and programs have even infiltrated churches. Our western culture has become intoxicated with the idea that *human beings are the measure of all things*. The individual has become something of a god in our western culture. But at the same time there is a renewed interest in religion. In Canada people are talking and writing about spirituality more than ever, even while the nation's mainline churches have never been emptier. People tend to believe virtually anything anyone has to say about the supernatural and spirituality. They make gods in their own image, to suit their taste. Even health-fad weight loss programs have gained an aura of spirituality.

Why do we see spiritual confusion, marital unfaithfulness, perversity in the media and even blatant homosexuality in our society? Why do we witness a lack of reverence for God, for human life from conception to natural death, and for nature? The main reason for the spiritual and moral decline is that God is no longer feared. Psalm 111:10 reminds us that the "fear of the Lord is beginning of wisdom." No one can be indifferent to the "fear of the Lord," it is a matter of life and death.

Love and Fear

What does the Bible mean by “fearing the Lord?” Is God not a God of love? Dr. Henk Hart of Toronto’s Institute of Christian Studies believes that fearing God is an outmoded Old Testament principle that should no longer function in our age. He says that in the Old Testament the “fear of the Lord is truly a matter of fear, dread even.” He contends that in the New Testament fear has been changed to love. He says, “I think the New Testament, late in its development for the most part, formulates our fundamental relation to God as one of loving rather than of fearing God.” Why does he make a sharp distinction between fearing and loving God? I believe that Dr. Hart’s interpretation of “fear” versus “love” is mistaken. It should be obvious that fearing God is not the same as being afraid. Christians are not asked to live in constant fear or dread, to live with a panicky feeling that we are utterly doomed. God is not a whimsical tyrant. We fear and love God at one and the same time. Fear and love are interchangeable words expressing our relationship to God. They describe the richness of God’s character. The Lord said to Moses, “Oh that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always” (Deut.5:29). In the following chapter the command is: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”(Deut.6:5). The apostle Paul tells the Ephesians to submit themselves to one another “in the fear of Christ”(Eph. 5:21). Biblical spirituality involves both the love and the fear of God, which is at the heart of our covenant relationship with God. To fear God is to love God. When we fear God, we are no longer in dread of Him. The love for God banishes the terror that shrinks from His presence (Rom.8:15). The Holy Spirit produces true fear of God in our hearts. He awakens and enlightens God’s elect (1 Cor. 2:9-16). He does it through the preaching of the Gospel. The Consuming Fire has become our Good Shepherd. As F.W. Faber said so well:

They love Thee little, if at all,
Who do not fear Thee much:
If love is Thine attraction, Lord,
Fear is Thy very touch.

Describing the Fear of God

The opening verse of the Book of Job describes Job as “blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.” The book of Proverbs characterizes the righteous as those who have “the fear of the Lord”(10:27; 14:27). The “fear of God” is Scripture’s primary requirement for our relationship with God. It is the very heart of true Biblical faith. “The Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love”(Ps.147:11). God fearing people don’t cower before their Creator. On the contrary, it gives them a sense of dignity, safety and joy. It is their source of confidence and spiritual strength. Whenever God draws near to man, He says to him,

“Fear not.” Fear, therefore, is characteristic for living in the covenant. In 1 Peter 1:17 we read, “Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” Amazing! We, who are unworthy, “stunned” by the presence of the Almighty, can approach Him without fear of retribution and call Him our Father!

God fearing people do not serve others gods, whatever these gods may be. They are absolutely loyal to their covenant God. They have totally and completely surrendered themselves to His power and authority. God fearing people know that they are dependent on Him. They trust Him with childlike faith. In the midst of uncertainties and dangers they can trust God to keep His Word. “In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid” (Ps.56: 4).

Awe and Worship

We come to God with reverence, aware of His holiness, with a deep sense of wonder and awe of His supreme majesty. God is worshiped, honored, and adored with reverent fear for whom and what He is. Have you sometimes sensed His glory in the wonder of His creation? Have you ever cried out with joy and wonder, “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens”? When we lived in the Philippines, I traveled several times by ship from Bacolod City to Manila, a twenty-three-hour journey. As I watched during the tropical night the brilliant star studded heavens, I was overwhelmed by awe and God’s glorious power.

God’s people know whom they are approaching. In our time, it is essential to remember that

Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, the very image of God, is also the object of worship. When I meditate on what Christ has done for my salvation, I must confess, “Amazing Love! How can it be, that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!” However, many Christians refer to Jesus as their friend or even as their buddy without acknowledging Him as the Lord of glory. It is often forgotten that many, who heard His teachings and saw His miracles, were overcome by reverential fear. When a crowd witnessed the healing of a paralytic and the forgiveness of his sins by our Lord, “they were filled with awe; and they praised God” (Matt.9:8). After our Lord had rebuked the wind and the raging water of the Sea of Galilee, the disciples were filled with “fear and amazement” (Luke 8:25). When the exiled apostle John saw the ascended Lord, he “fell at his feet as though dead.” And the Lord placed His right hand on John and said, “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever!” (Rev.1:17,18).

Awe is the essential element in the worship of God; yet this sense of awe in the presence of God is missing in our day. The casual approach seems to be the rule rather than the exception. The South African theologian Dr. Flip Buys notes that too much of our worship is ritual without reality, form without power, fun without the fear of God, ultimately religion without God. The Jewish theologian Louis Jacobs correctly observes that religion devoid of the fear of God tends to become reduced to comfortable sentimentality. Dr. A.W. Tozer called worship “the missing Jewel of the evangelical church.” Do we go to church to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, to spend our time in awesome wonder and adoration? How many bow their heads in worship before the church service begins? Do we still humble ourselves before the holy God? Tozer observed, “It is delightful to worship God, but it is also a humbling thing; and the man who has not been humbled in the presence of God will never be a worshiper of God at all.”

The Fear of Man

Oswald Chambers said, “The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else.” He was right. When God is feared, every other fear is destroyed. The fear of anyone other than God is futile. “Fear of man

will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe” (Prov.29:25). Unfortunately, our fear of the people we see makes it easy to ignore God, the One we cannot see.

The immediate displeasure of people seems more tangible and threatening than the displeasure of God. Jesus recognized this dilemma when He warned His disciples: “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has the power to throw you into hell.” (Luke 12:4,5) In other words, the wise Christian will fear his God and ignore the contempt and ridicule of the world.

When we fear God, the fear of what people may do to us will be driven away. Many Christians are afraid to speak and act for Christ. They readily talk about Him in their close circle of family and friends but are silent about Him in the marketplace of life. They don’t have to fear persecution because no one in the public square knows about their Christian faith. But God does not call upon Christians to be silent and timid. The early Christians were persecuted because they feared God more than Caesar. In the time of the church father Cyprian (c.200/10-258) Christians suffered bitter persecution. In the perilous and heroic days in which he lived it was natural that exhortations to faithfulness were mingled with words of encouragement and comfort. “The time of the Antichrist is at hand,” he writes to the Christians of Thibaris, “and the world is passing away: we must prepare for battle, thinking of nothing but the glory of eternal life.” When Martin Luther had to appear before the Emperor on April 18, 1521, the question was put before him whether he would defend the books he had written or withdraw them in whole or part, his answer was clear. He confessed that he could not withdraw one word because he was subject to the Scriptures he had quoted and his conscience was captive to the Word of God. “It is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against one’s conscience. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. So help me God.” Luther feared God rather than the emperor. The great Scottish reformer John Knox was afraid of no man. Of his preaching it was said, “Others lop off branches, but this man strikes at the root.” The Regent of Scotland spoke over his grave these memorable words, “Here lies one who never feared the face of man.” When the Nazis tried to take over the Christian school in Arnhem, the Netherlands, Rev. J. Overduin plunged into the conflict. He didn’t yield an inch. He wanted to support the parents who sent their children to the Christian school as well as the school board. Several days before the Sunday he planned to proclaim a concrete and unambiguous word from the pulpit, he asked

his wife for her support and asked her if she was prepared for the possible consequences of his imprisonment. Her answer was short: “What we need today are men, not cowards.” On February 8, 1941, Overduin preached his sermon on Matthew 5:11,12, reminding the congregation that the entire nation was that day observing a day of prayer for Christian education, which was in great danger throughout, and particularly in Arnhem. After the delivery of his sermon, Overduin was arrested, jailed, and later sent to Dachau, one of the Nazi’s infamous concentration camps. Overduin feared God rather than the Nazis.

Missions

The apostle Paul proclaimed the Gospel with boldness. He didn’t think of missions as a spare time hobby. He had a vision of the Lord of glory, obeyed the Great Commission, and went out into the world to proclaim the only message that can truly liberate - the Gospel. Because he feared his God, he was filled with zeal. He said, “Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men” (2 Cor.5:11). Because he feared his Lord, he didn’t count the cost. He confessed, “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things” (Phil 3:7,8).

When we fear God, we will be missions minded. I have heard it said that contemporary mission and evangelism efforts of Reformed Christians are weak and show poor results. I do not believe for one moment that this weakness is on account of our theology. The history of the Reformed churches shows that whenever God was greatly feared there was a real zeal for missions, which God greatly blessed. One example of such zeal is the 16th century effective church growth in France. The late professor Douglas MacMillan, church historian of the Free Reformed Churches in Scotland, noted that **2000** Reformed congregations were planted in a time space of only **20** years in France by missionaries who were trained at the academy of John Calvin in Geneva in the years 1545 - 1565. When our hearts are filled with the fear of God, love for a lost and condemned world will drive us to obey the Great Commission as a Church.

Conclusion

If we ever needed courageous and bold Christians who fear God rather than people, it is now. The Christian faith in Canada has become immobilized and trivialized because many Christian leaders have been busy selling out to our secular- consumer culture. Statistics show that Christians have become long in consumption and short in their commitment. In his book *Unknown Gods: The Ongoing Story of Religion in Canada*, Dr. Reginald Bibby says that in days of yore, prophets could emerge from the wilderness and proclaim to the citizenry, "Thus saith the Lord." He states that in the last days of the twentieth century such prophets have become scarce. He notes, "*In a multicultural Canada, they would be ridiculed, perhaps arrested, maybe hospitalized.*" And this is already happening! In our multicultural and politically correct Canada, Christians can expect opposition and contempt when they are pro-life, oppose acceptance of homosexuality as normal behavior, support a Christian labor association, a Christian political party, or try to teach from a Christian perspective at a secular university. However, the victory is still ours. As Martin Luther wrote amidst of the great conflicts of his time:

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten
To undo us, we will **not fear**, for God has willed
His truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim,
we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure,
for lo! his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him.