

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-08-20—FEAR OF THE LORD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

When talking about fearing the Lord, I have heard some try to explain it as “respect” for God. The word *fear* in the Bible means, well, just that—terror, fear, fright, etc. Claiming that it means some form of respect just does not fit with Scripture. In truth, that way of thinking is just an attempt to soften the reality that the God of this vast universe will render terrible judgments upon those who practice evil in this world.

The idea that fear of the Lord is just respect is a very Protestant one that came about over the last 100 years or so. People wanted to worship a god they see as only loving and kind because they do not want to have to keep God’s Law. It is also the view many have of God judging the world in righteousness. To judge in *righteousness* sounds almost congenial. But it was not always the dominant view. Sermons of this nation’s early preachers are referred to as “fire and brimstone” because they were strong warnings of the destruction that God promised to bring upon those who rejected His commandments.

The reality is that God’s righteous judgment against the wicked will be anything but pleasant. It says in Heb. 10:27 there will be “a **terrifying** expectation of inevitable **judgment** and of fierce fire, which will devour the adversaries of God.”

So why does God want us to view Him as both fearful AND loving? We can find a clear example with Pharaoh during the times of Moses. During the seventh plague of hail, Pharaoh spoke with Moses:

EXODUS 9:28-30 Pray to the LORD, *for it is enough*. Let there be no *more* mighty thunderings and hail. And I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer.”
29 And Moses said to him, “As soon as I go out of the city, I will spread abroad my hands to the LORD. The thunder shall stop, and the hail will not be any more, so that you may know that the earth is the LORD’S. 30 But *as for you and your servants, **I know that you do not yet fear the LORD God.***”

The plagues upon Egypt were also meant as a lesson for the ancient Israelites:

EXODUS 14:31 And **Israel saw that great work which the LORD did upon the Egyptians.** And **the people feared the LORD,** and believed the LORD and His servant Moses.

The terrible plagues that God brought upon the Egyptians also brought fear into the hearts of the ancient Israelites. But why did God want them to fear Him? It is very simple—fear is the beginning motivation for obedience! God said:

DEUTERONOMY 6:2 That **you might fear the LORD your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments** which I command you, you, and your son, and your son’s son, all the days of your life, and **so that your days may be prolonged.**

The way of the human heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked¹. When God first made His presence known to the ancient Israelites, they needed motivation to obey. Recall how many times the people rebelled in the journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai. Even after witnessing God's great power and wrath upon the Egyptians, they still could not bring themselves to obey God except when He brought destruction upon them.

Rebellion is the result of the law of sin and death² that prevails in the hearts of all mankind. This was the mind that entered into all people after the sin of Adam—everyone claims the right to decide what is right and wrong in their own eyes. They reject being told what is good or evil by God (or others, for that matter). This kind of attitude requires a strong motivator to overcome.

It is why a child must first know fear of punishment in order to learn obedience to the parents. Children do not naturally obey them in the beginning. A child who is punished for disobedience early on will usually have a healthy fear as an adult of those responsible for enforcing governmental laws when they are broken. This is the principle behind “Train up a child **in the way** he should go; and **when he is old**, he will not depart from it.” (Prov. 22:6). A child who fears punishment for disobedience to the parents is unlikely to become an adult criminal.

When the Bible talks about fearing God, it is truly one of terror, fear, and fright because that is what is required to get our attention—at least in the beginning. With a child, the hope of the parents is that the blessings for obedience eventually replace fear with love. A child who initially obeys out of fear of punishment will become an adult who teaches his or her own children to obey the very same laws their parents taught them. Why? Because a child can only begin to appreciate and love the family rules AFTER they begin to obey them and receive the blessings they bring. Eventually, they come to understand that the blessings are a result of OBEYING the rules.

This is the way of all people since the beginning. Mankind will only keep God's Law if they fear the consequences of disobedience. But it is through **keeping** God's Law that they begin to understand God promises are a blessing. The formula for this was given by Moses:

DEUTERONOMY 10:12-13 And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but **to fear the LORD** your God, to **walk in all His ways**, and to **love Him**, and to **serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul**, 13 To **keep the commandments of the LORD, and His statutes** which I command you today **for your good?**

Did you notice the order? First is fear of God. Next, as they walk in His ways (obey Him) they learn to love and willingly serve God because they realize that keeping His Law produces GOOD! God *blesses* them for obedience.

¹ Jer. 17:9.

² Rom. 8:2.

The same is true of us. There are few believers who did not have a healthy fear of punishment (death) once we understood we had sinned against God. Many times the first major trial a believer endures involves the Sabbaths or holydays, usually because an employer or unconverted spouse demands they compromise those days. The heartfelt reaction to such a temptation is often one of fear, at least in the beginning. Once someone determines to keep Sabbaths or holydays regardless of what other people do³, God strengthens them with His Holy Spirit and even blesses them. That leads us to loving God's Law and His ways. The churches during the time of the apostles knew this in a very personal way because of the persecution that abounded:

ACTS 9:31 Then the churches throughout the whole of Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace indeed. *And* they increased, being edified and **walking in the fear of the Lord** and **in the comfort of the Holy Spirit**.

It is only natural to fear threats of punishment, whether of God or of evil men. The difference is that men have nothing more to offer than fear. The wicked of this world use FEAR to force people to **obey**. Who has ever been BLESSED for keeping the laws of man? There is only punishment for NOT keeping them.

God, on the other hand, gives us a spirit of power, love, and a sound mind⁴ to obey His Law. Obedience to Him is never done out of fear because “the purpose of the commandment is love out of a pure heart, and a good conscience, and genuine faith” (1 Tim. 1:5). The fact that God blesses those who keep His Law is absolutely contrary to man's ways of enforcing obedience through fear. Obeying God brings blessings of joy and peace from above⁵. There is NO fear for those who obey Him.

The most wonderful reason to obey God is that fear no longer rules in our hearts. In fact, no one who loves God and keeps His commandments should fear anything in this life, including death. Jesus Christ said:

JOHN 16:33 These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. **In the world you shall have tribulation. But be courageous! I have overcome the world.**”

Fear is the way of the world and it is the motivation for many believers when they are first called. In fact, the Bible says that “fear is the beginning of wisdom” in numerous places⁶. But fear is just a beginning; it is not the end. God uses fear to get our attention so we will stop and listen to Him. God wants us to fear the judgment that is coming upon those who practice evil but move past fear and grow to love Him. Perhaps this is why the Scripture says:

³ Heb. 13:6.

⁴ 2 Tim. 1:7.

⁵ Rom. 15:13.

⁶ Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 15:3; Isa. 11:2.

DEUTERONOMY 6:5 And **you shall love** the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

It always seemed a bit strange that God would COMMAND people to love Him. How does anyone, even God, command someone to love another? I think the answer lies in the prior verses:

DEUTERONOMY 6:1-5 “Now these *are* the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments which the LORD our God commanded to teach you so that you might do *them* in the land where you go to possess it, 2 **That you might fear the LORD your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments** which I command you, you, and your son, and your son’s son, all the days of your life, and so that your days may be prolonged. 3 Hear therefore, O Israel, and **be diligent to observe it, so that it may be well with you**, and that you may greatly multiply, as the LORD God of our fathers has promised you, in the land that flows with milk and honey. 5 And **you shall love the LORD your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

God commanded the ancient Israelites to obey His Law out of fear of punishment for disobedience. However, as they obeyed, God blessed them more and more. They learned that obedience brought blessings! What child does not naturally love blessings from the parents? So, it was through the blessings of God that they were to grow to love God; that is, “they shall [*come to (future tense)*] love the Lord”.

While fear is a beginning motivation for many, believers are to put away fear because it will not exist in God’s kingdom:

1 JOHN 4:18-19 **There is no fear in the love of God**; rather, perfect **love casts out fear** because fear has torment. And **the one who fears has not been made perfect in the love of God**. 19 We love Him because He loved us first.

In truth, fear of God is not *respect*. It is truly a terror that will come upon those who practice evil in the Day of Judgment. For all others, there might be fear of God in the beginning but obedience to Him eventually brings indescribable blessings upon those who keep His commandments. If fear is the beginning, AGAPE LOVE is the **completion** for all God’s people!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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