

The Meaning of the Fear of God: The Crucial Notion of the Everlasting Gospel– A Biblical Study

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The first imperative of the everlasting Gospel as described in Rev 14:6–13 is plainly expressed: “Fear God” (Greek: *fobethete ton theon*). The context of this command is the announcement of God’s judgment which leads to three imperatives. The notion of fearing God plays a primary role among these commands: “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water” (Rev 14:7 NIV). This shocking command is disturbing for at least five reasons:

1. It sounds negative and may produce a phobic reaction. Humans are naturally full of different fears, and this statement entices to fear even more.
2. It contradicts many biblical encouraging proclamations to not fear. God exhorts, for example, through Isaiah: “For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, do not fear; I will help you” (Isa 41:13 NIV).
3. It creates a distorted picture about God and true religion. It looks like God is a fearful deity, and Christianity should be a religion of fear.

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4. It is significant to observe that the Bible portrays fear as the result of sin. It was actually one of the first consequences of sin. So why cultivate it? After eating from the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve were hiding from God in the Garden of Eden because they were afraid of Him. Instead of enjoying God's Presence, they were avoiding Him in dread. Fear was a product of their disobedience. When God, the Lord, asked in His search for lost humanity: "Where are you?" Adam's answer reveals their feelings of shame and guilt: "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid . . . and I hid myself" (Gen 3:10 NKJV).
5. Satan's strategy is to lead people into different fears. He uses fears of various kinds including fear of persecution, abuse, and violence (1 Pet 3:14; Rev 2:10; compare Matt 5:10–12) to lead people astray from God, into dependence upon him, and into false worship (Rev 13:4, 7–8).

Thus, it is apparent that the meaning of the phrase, "Fear God," is a puzzle. How to make sense of it? How to understand it?

It is true that many times in the Holy Scripture God cheers His people with the divine command: "Do not fear" (like in Isa 35:4; 41:10, 14; 43:1). Note that these appeals are God's encouragements against our personal existential fears that may be of various kinds: relational, financial, medical, occupational, social, emotional, spatial, etc. Fears of death, guilt, pain, and bad conscience are the worst phobias. Our fears are consequences of our transgressions; they are an integral part of our sinful nature and circumstances of life. These different kinds of fear can be overcome by only trusting the Lord. David expresses it very eloquently when he states: "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you" (Ps 56:3 NIV). The divine exhortations of trusting and confidence are supported by His numerous promises that He is with His people, they are in His loving and caring hands, and no one can snatch them from His embrace (John 10:28–29; Isa 49:15–16; Matt 28:20). We belong to Him; we are His, for He is always for us and never against us (Rom 8:31). No one and nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom 8:35–39). We can be assured that our past, present, and future are secured in Him. God teaches His followers not to be self-centered but to fully trust in Him.

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Indeed, God commands: “Do not fear,” and then surprisingly instructs: “Fear!” However, this call to fear is different because it is very specific with a different object. We have to fear God! Life becomes God-centered instead of anthro-centered, which means that the direction of fear dramatically changes; it is aimed toward God. We should fear the Person who is our Creator, Redeemer, Judge, Lord, and King. We should fear the Ruler and Director of the entire universe who loved humanity so much that Jesus Christ could become our Redeemer (John 3:16; Rom 5:6, 8, 10–11). Thus, we should not be preoccupied and distracted by fearing people, institutions, things, or future. It becomes evident that this type of fear is focused toward God and is completely different than the various personal fears previously described.

This crucial observation leads us to a significant recognition that the command “Fear God” is a theological and relational notion in sharp contrast to existential fears. And because this relationship with God is expressed theologically, one must interpret this terminology from that perspective, and only then can this specific phrase be properly understood. The word *fear* in our modern languages has a different connotation from the one found in this biblical word. The biblical vocabulary reveals that this category is actually very positive. The scriptural teaching regarding the fear of God should build constructive thinking, evoke joyful emotions, and empower our will to follow God. It should draw people closer to their God, motivate them to be better persons, and transform their character. In this way, believers need to make a clear distinction between their personal, existential fears, on the one hand, and theological fear as the divine command, on the other hand. The fear of God is a highly doctrinal term, and thus should not be understood in the sense of everyday common language.

Proper Sequence

It is important to note that the command to “fear God” is expressed in the context of the eternal Gospel (Rev 14:6–7). The term everlasting Gospel is a *hapax legomenon* and suggests that this Good News, which is preached at the end of time, is not something new. On the contrary, it is the Gospel which was always valid, never changed, and its acceptance or rejection brings eternal consequences. Fearing God is a result of God’s judging activity that has for its goal to justify, save, deliver, and vindicate

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those who honestly and sincerely commit their lives to Him.¹ This divine positive initiative motivates the believer to fear God.

Imperatives of the Gospel always follow the indicative of the Gospel.² This is reflected also in our text: first comes the indicative, namely recognition that the time of God's judgment is here, and then comes three imperatives of the Good News: fear God, give Him glory, and worship the Creator. God first justifies, saves, liberates, and vindicates people because He died for them on the Cross to redeem them, and then He tells them what to do. He is the warrant of the future, the Giver of eternal life, because He is the Judge. This provides for the right motivation: gratitude and thankfulness to God for the wonderful gift of salvation. The more a person knows the loving Lord, the more one wants to serve Him. Fearing God results in accepting and responding to God's grace, and experiencing His forgiveness: "But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared" (Ps 130:4 ESV).

Unique Phrase and Dominant Biblical Teaching

It is astonishing that the phrase, "Fear God" (Greek: *fobethete ton theon*; imperative aorist passive, 2nd person plural from the verb *foebomai*) is a *hapax legomenon*, occurring in this form only once in the entire Bible, in the Septuagint and the New Testament. Yet, this phrase appropriately summarizes a rich biblical teaching on this topic. It is not reflecting John's invention or originality. This imperative is saturated with Old Testament

¹ For the full explanation of the meaning of God's judgment as justification, salvation, deliverance, and vindication, see my article, "The Gospel According to God's Judgment: Judgment as Salvation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 22, no. 1 (2011): 28–49.

² There are countless examples of this fundamental biblical truth. Four examples suffice to demonstrate it sufficiently: (1) God first created Adam and Eve out of love and provided for an abundant life, and then He commanded them how to maintain this joyful life; (2) God first demonstrated His grace to Israel by liberating them from Egyptian slavery, and only then did He bring them to Mt. Sinai to give them His commandments in the form of 10 promises; (3) Paul in Romaines first explained that we are all sinners and in need of salvation in Christ and what that means in life (chaps. 1–8), and only then did he present the ethical consequences of accepting the Gospel (chaps. 12–16); (4) in the first three chapters to Ephesians, Paul explains the richness of God's mercy, and then in the following three chapters he teaches how to walk in the light of this Gospel. The announcement of the Gospel comes first before He invites people to follow Him.

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teaching and taken from a cluster of texts. One can find very similar Greek statements in LXX in Lev 19:14, 32; 25:17, 36, 43 (“You shall fear your God/Lord”);³ Deut 6:13 (“Fear the Lord your God”); Josh 24:14 (“Fear the Lord”); Ps 33:10 (“Fear the Lord”); and Eccl 12:13 (“Fear God,” expressed in sg.).

“The Heb. root *yr’* I appears a total of 435x in the OT.”⁴ The noun *yir’ah* “fear” occurs 44 times in the Old Testament, and the verb *yare’* “to fear” is employed around 330 times in the Hebrew Bible. In the Greek New Testament, the noun *phobos* “fear” is used 47 times and the verb *phobeomai* “to fear” is employed 95 times.

A few examples suffice to demonstrate that the fear of God is a fundamental and frequent teaching of the Bible and appears in all three parts of the Hebrew Scriptures: the Torah, Prophets, and Writings. It occurs at crucial places in God’s revelation.⁵ Study carefully the following representative samples:

1. The non-verbal expression “fear of God” appears for the first time in Gen 20:11 in the statement of Abraham to Abimelech when he laments: “There is surely no fear of God in this place.” It is interesting that Abraham’s statement reveals his mistrust toward God and his fear of the king.
2. At Mount Sinai, God spoke in a very powerful and direct way to Israel and the people were afraid. Moses explained to them why God did it: “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning” (Exod 20:20 NIV).⁶

³ The Hebrew expression in these texts is *weyare’ta*.

⁴ M. V. Van Pelt and W. C. Kaiser, Jr., “יָרָא,” in *New International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 2:291.

⁵ It is highly significant that the idea of the fear of God “is not as dominant in the Dead Sea Scrolls as it is in the Old Testament” (G. A. Lee, “Fear,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991], 2:291). However, “the members of the [Qumran] community are called . . . ‘those who fear God’” (ibid.).

⁶ The noun expression *weyir’at* occurs in Job 6:14; Prov 1:29; and Isa 11:2.

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3. For the first time the verb “to fear” as part of the expression “to fear God” occurs in God’s appraisal of Abraham’s faith after he was willing to obey God and sacrifice his son Isaac: “Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son” (Gen 22:12 NIV).⁷
4. For the second time the verbal expression “fear God” is used by Joseph when he encourages his brothers in Egypt to do what he commands: “Do this and you will live, for I fear God” (Gen 42:18 ESV).
5. Fear of God is a dominant feature, crucial theme, and highly stressed concept (15 times) in prominent places in the book of Deuteronomy (Deut 4:10; 5:29; 6:2, 13, 24; 8:6; 10:12, 20; 13:4; 14:23; 17:19; 25:18; 28:58; 31:12, 13). In addition, the reference to fear (Hebrew *yare*’) without connection to the fear of God is used 23 times (out of 38 of the total occurrences; for example, in Deut 1:19, 21, 29; 2:4; 7:19; 11:25; 28:10). The Lord is an awesome, i.e., fearful God (7:21; 10:17).
6. People of God need to learn how to fear God, therefore the Lord gives directions on how to properly do so. It was God’s desire to teach His people how to revere Him so they could teach their children the correct attitude toward Him. Moses declared to them: “The LORD said to me, ‘Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so’” (Deut 4:10 NIV). Also, the plain summary of the purpose of the book is thus expressed several times within the book. Moses speaks to the whole nation that they will learn how to fear God and to maintain the proper relationship with the Lord their God in love and obedience to Him: “So they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law”

⁷ Note that when the verb “fear” occurs for the first time in Gen 3:10, when Adam and Eve sinned against God, the meaning is negative. This fear is the result of disobedience and the opposite of trusting the Lord.

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(Deut 31:12). It is reinforced in the following verse: “Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess” (Deut 31:13).

7. This teaching will have a great impact and influence on the historical books (e.g., Joshua, 1–2 Samuels, 1–2 Kings, and 1–2 Chronicles) as well as the prophetic books (e.g., Isaiah and Jeremiah).
8. By design the theme of fearing God is most elaborated in the Wisdom Literature, thus underlining that we can be wise only if we cultivate a personal relationship with God. Many verses speak about it because one cannot be wise unless that individual cultivates the fear of God. Actually, it is the beginning of wisdom; it is a necessary prerequisite (Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7; 4:7; 9:10; cf. Job 28:28). The fear of God is thus a starting point as well as an essential factor for acquiring wisdom. “Who is the man who fears the LORD? Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose” (Ps 25:12 ESV).
9. Only in the introduction to the drama of the book of Job is it stated four times that Job fears God: Job 1:1; Job 1:8; Job 1:9; Job 2:3.
10. It is not difficult to find references about fearing the Lord in Proverbs because it is a dominant theme in this book. The term “fear the Lord” is used six times (1:29; 3:7; 8:13; 14:16; 15:33; 24:21); the phrase “the fear of the Lord” occurs ten times (1:7; 2:5; 9:10; 10:27; 14:27; 15:16; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17); the book commends everyone who “fears the Lord” (14:2, 26); and culminates with the praise of the woman who “fears the Lord” (31:30). The very foundation of wisdom is the “fear of God.”
11. The concept of fearing God is found in five passages of the book of Ecclesiastes even though this key word occurs seven times: (A) “I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men

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will revere [fear] him” (Eccl 3:14); (B) “Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore, stand in awe of God [fear God]” (Eccl 5:7); (C) “It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all *extremes*” (Eccl 7:18); (D) “Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow” (Eccl 8:12–13; the term is employed three times); (E) “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole *duty* of man” (Eccl 12:13).

12. Nehemiah cultivated the fear of God in His life. His success lay in God and his relationship with Him, namely, in exercising the Presence of the Lord in his heart. His life flowed toward God and depended upon this vertical relationship with His God. Nehemiah states that God’s servants “delight to fear” (ESV) Him, i.e., they “delight in revering” (NIV) His name (Neh 1:11). When Nehemiah discovered that the leaders of God’s people were exploiting the poor, he openly charged them and said: “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you *walk in the fear of our God* to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?” (Neh 5:9 NIV; emphasis added). Nehemiah also explained that he never used his right to be served and get financial support for himself as governor nor for his brothers (5:14–15) and gave a clear reason for it: “But I did not do so, because of the *fear of God*. I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work” (Neh 5:15b–16 ESV; emphasis added). Accepting and responding to God’s grace results in fearing God.

What Fearing God Does Not Mean

The imperative of fearing God is often misunderstood; therefore, it is useful to clearly state what this command does not mean. It does not refer (1) to be afraid of God; (2) to be scared of Him; or (3) to tremble before Him with fear. However, we should not quickly dismiss the notion of physical fear or trembling from the concept of the fear of the Lord, because

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the proper trembling is an experience of awe before God, when we understand that we as sinners are in the presence of the Holy Lord. People of God are rightly overwhelmed by God's Holiness. Moses's experience on Sinai is transparent: "The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, 'I am trembling with fear'" (Heb 12:21 NIV; see also Ps 90:11).

There is a fine balance and tension between fearing and trembling. Fearing God means having a sense of God's holiness, His otherness and purity, and our human sinfulness, impurity and imperfection. In the setting of theophany, it's impossible to stay "calm" because His Presence is overwhelming. A proper balance is needed in the tensions of life: "Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him" (Ps 2:11–12 ESV). Even as we stand in awe of God, we can rejoice (Isa 12:6); therefore, the fear of the Lord does not mean to be terrified but to tremble in awe before His Holiness and Word (Isa 66:2).

We do not naturally know how to fear God and have lost its relevancy. Consequently, we need to learn how to experience it (Deut 31:12–13). God is holy, we are sinful, and this leads to humility. He is the God of love, the Other One, the God of Truth and Justice, thus we admire, follow, and worship Him for no one is like Him (Exod. 34:6–8; Isa. 40:25–29; 44:6–8). The fear of God is closely connected to worshipping God as different translations of Jeremiah 32:39 indicate: "I will give them one heart and one way, that they may *fear me* forever" (Jer 32:39 ESV, emphasis mine; thus also NIV, NKJV), but CEB renders the result of having one heart in the following way: ". . . that they may worship me" (thus also NLT; for the close connection between fearing God and worshiping Him, see Isa 33:6; Jer 5:22–24; 10:7).

"Fear" is often mentioned in the context of theophany where God reveals Himself or the Angel of the Lord appears to humans (Gen 3:10; 15:1; 18:15, etc.). The Presence of God creates overwhelming awe, and sinners (fragile human beings with sinful natures) are overpowered by the solemnity of the occasion because they are in the presence of the Holy God. Humans cannot manipulate or play with the Holy Lord! When Isaiah received the vision about the majesty of God and heavenly beings adoring God as three times holy, he cried: "Woe to me!" (6:5). It is highly significant that before Isaiah freely uttered the many woes upon the wicked

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(1:4; 3:9, 11; 5:8, 11, 18, 20–22), he was confronted with and encountered God’s holiness, and then the prophet personally saw that he himself was also lost and that he could only be cleansed by God Himself as an expression of His grace (Isa 6:6–8).

Reflective students of the Bible understand that fearing God points to respecting and revering God. I would like to go beyond this basic understanding and dig deeper while asking a fundamental question: What does it mean to respect God in practical terms? I would like further to demonstrate how everything in our life depends on our understanding and application of the “fear of the Lord.”

Definitions of Fearing God

Every diligent disciple of the Word of God understands that reverence to God is a theological expression, and I provide four definitions of this phrase which may help people to grasp its profound meaning:

Definition No. 1. To fear God means to make all our decisions in respect to God and His will. This means that whatever we do, we should do in high regard to Him, His law, His teaching, and consequently in respect of our neighbor and nature. To fear God means to do everything in close relationship to Him.

To understand this meaning, imagine that you are going on a mission trip to India and after three weeks you return and your spouse asks you: “When you were in India, did you always think about me?” If you are honest you would answer, “No,” because you know that you did not engage your thoughts around your spouse the whole time. Then you see a frown and inquiring eyes of your beloved one, so you quickly add: “Do not worry, honey, because anytime I have to make a decision (and you are part of this decision process) I always do it in respect to you!”

As we are unable to always think about our parent, spouse, or child, likewise we are unable at all times to think about God. However, a faithful child, parent, or spouse will always make their decisions in regard and respect to their loved one. Similarly, we ought to make all our decisions in regards to God, His word, His law, and His will.

Biblically speaking, to fear means to revere and worship God. Fearing God has a close connotation with adoration. “Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the people of the world revere Him” (Ps 33:8; see also Eccl 8:12–13; Jer 10:6–7). It is a loving reverence for God built on total submission to

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Him as the Lord and King (Mal 1:14) and to His will (John 14:15; Hos 6:1; Joel 2:12; cf. Jer 2:19).

Definition No. 2. To fear God means to fear to grieve Him, to make Him sad. Fear is a relational term because it is about fearing God. Relationship is actually everything in life. True relationship is built on trust and respect. One cannot claim to be in a loving marital relationship and cheat on a spouse. Faithfulness is expected and hating to do what would complicate such a relationship is spontaneously anticipated. King Solomon declares: “To fear the LORD is to hate evil” (Prov 8:13).

A simple illustration may illuminate this aspect: When my daughters were small, around six, they would ask: “Daddy, whom should we marry?” This was a perfect age to teach them in response to such a good question. My answer was straightforward and simple: “Marry someone who fears to grieve God, who is afraid to make Him sad!” Then I explained why: “Because only if that person who wants to marry you, fears to make God sad, will he fear to make you sad. If that person will fear to grieve God, he will fear to grieve you. If he will not fear to make God sad, he will not fear to make you sad. If he will have no respect for God, he/she will have no respect for you. If he does not care about God or have respect for God, he will not care about you nor have respect for you!” Not showing kindness to a friend is to deny the fear of God: “Anyone who withholds kindness from a friend forsakes the fear of the Almighty” (Job 6:14 NIV).

We cannot be a measure of what is right in ourselves because in our sinful nature we are self-centered and selfish. We need to accept respecting a higher authority than ours if we want to be successful and build lasting relationships. Law and authority must come outside of us. Otherwise we will always give preference to our own wishes and desires. This is why respect for God, His teaching, and His law is so crucial and important. Keeping His instructions in our heart is a way of success (Josh 1:5–9; Ps 1:1–6; 37:3–6; Prov 3:5–7).

Our relationship with God is the most important relationship in life; all other relationships spring from it. On it depends everything meaningful. David, the servant of the Lord, powerfully explains: “I have a message from God in my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before their eyes. In their own eyes they flatter themselves too much to detect or hate their sin. The words of their mouths are wicked and deceitful; they fail to act wisely or do good. Even on their beds they plot

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evil; they commit themselves to a sinful course and do not reject what is wrong” (Ps 36:1–4 NIV).

One can put it positively: To fear God means to make God happy. As children will seek to do many things in order to see their parents happy and smiling, so we should similarly do in our relationship with God. Maybe one says, this is so simple. Let me remind you of the words of Jesus: “And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’” (Matt 18:3 NIV). “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15 NIV). “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:4 ESV). What does make God happy? “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8 NIV).

Definition No. 3. One can define the fear of God as loving and obeying the Lord. The concept of love in the notion of fear is not present in our modern languages. Unfortunately, this dimension disappeared and is lost. However, it is preserved in the biblical Hebrew. It is the only language, to my knowledge, where it is explicitly stated.

Study very carefully the following verse which with several terms explains the meaning of the fear of God: “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?” (Deut 10:12–13 NIV; see also Deut 6:1–3). Moses underlines that to fear God means to love Him and obey. See also the following text: “But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children.” (Ps 103:17) Consider a parallelism in Proverbs 16:6 where fear of the Lord corresponds to love and faithfulness: “Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; through the fear of the Lord a man avoids evil.”

To fear God means to be in love with Him, in total submission,

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dedication, and admirable obedience.⁸ “Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God” (Isa 50:10 ESV). “But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him” (Acts 10:35 NKJV).

Fearing God and keeping His commandments, laws, and statutes is closely associated in the Hebrew Bible (Deut 5:29; 6:2, 24; Eccl 12:13). The text of Deut 12:10 makes it explicit: to fear the Lord means “to observe the Lord’s commands and decrees.” Obedience goes hand to hand with a respect for God. Revering God leads to taking seriously His law and carefully listening and following His precepts. It is impossible to fear God and disregard His law, instructions, and teaching. Fearing God means loving and trusting Him and relying on His Word!

Definition No. 4. To fear God means to see God. It leads to cultivating the keen awareness that we always live in His Presence. It means to live constantly in God’s atmosphere and be aware that He is here. It means to be conscious/mindful that God sees us and to have an assurance that He is present with us.

However, we need to remind ourselves that God is not a Heavenly Policeman seeking to punish us, but a loving, caring Parent helping us to grow. He watches over us as a loving parent who watches, cares, and protects his/her children.

There is a play in Hebrew between two Hebrew words: to see (Hebrew, *ra’ah*) and to fear (Hebrew, *yare’*) (consonants *resh* and *aleph* are shared together). This observation is supported by several biblical texts when those who fear God are constantly aware of God’s eye upon them: “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.” (Ps 32:8 NIV). He always sees us—we cannot flee from His Presence and His eye is constantly on us. This does not mean that He is a Heavenly Controller but instead He is a gracious, understanding, and compassionate Friend! “The eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him” (Ps 33:18). Thus, the fear of God is an acute consciousness

⁸ One needs to think seriously of how we can train our children to fear the Lord. Consider the following: “Parents are to look upon their children as entrusted to them of God to be educated for the family above. Train them in the fear and love of God; for ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’” (Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance* [Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1954], 23).

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of God's eye upon us and having the full assurance that we are living in His presence. Job declares: "For he views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When he established the force of the wind and measured out the waters, when he made a decree for the rain and a path for the thunderstorm, then he looked at wisdom and appraised it; he confirmed it and tested it. And he said to man, 'The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding'" (Job 28:24–28).

In order to cultivate a sense of awe before God, we need to enjoy His Presence, sense His holiness, and maintain a correct trembling before His grace and love! "Holy, holy, Holy, is the God Almighty!" (Isa 6:1–3; see also Phil 2:12–13). God is not our equal Partner or a sentimental God but a consuming Fire and the God of faithful love. The fear of God is the solemn awareness of God's Presence and His caring sight on us!

Once I visited an old sister who was cooking for a youth group. When I arrived, I heard singing. "Are you having worship now?" I asked. "No, I was just singing while cooking: just Jesus and me!"

We need to cultivate a relationship with the Lord even while working, to be in tune with Jesus (like listening to the radio). One cannot always think about God, but we can be in the same frequency with Him every second of life. As I need to turn my TV to a specific channel in order to listen to the BBC news, so we need to be in a constant conversation with our Lord. We need to turn all our activities into our devotional time.

This was the way David experienced the fear of the Lord. When he engaged in a right imagination, when he saw God before him, he was unconquerable; but when he lost the Lord from His sight, he was vulnerable (remember his tragic encounter with Bathsheba; 2 Samuel 11). David proclaims: "I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken" (Ps 16:8). Contrast it with his observations: "An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes" (Ps 36:1). "The arrogant are attacking me, O God; a band of ruthless men seeks my life—men without regard for you" (Ps 86:14; see also Ps 56:3–4). Wickedness is the result and opposite to the fear of God.

Moses did what seems impossible from the human perspective: "By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27 NIV). This is a paradox of faith. He saw Him who is invisible. It looks like an impossible possibility! Moses did

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not fear Pharaoh but God and by the inner sight of faith he saw the invisible God.

Some Christians do this in a very tangible manner to remind themselves that God is present, to imagine Him alongside them: When they eat, they put another plate on the table to remind them that Jesus is eating with them. When they drive they invite Jesus to sit in the car with them. When they read, watch TV, or work on their computers, they place a chair for Jesus beside them to represent His participation in these activities. They just turn everything they do into a conversation with God. One is not obliged to it in this way, but it is important to transform all our activities into a prayer and dialogue with God. Thus, the fear of God is the keen awareness that you live in His presence and you willingly want to live in harmony with Him. We were created into that fellowship with God who is We, the plural of fellowship.

Wisdom of Life

Godly wisdom is explained in the central piece of the book of Ecclesiastes. King Solomon in chapter 7 and verses 15–20 describes the tight connection between true wisdom and the fear of God on the basis of his own observations: “In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness. Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise? why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool? why die before your time? It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all *extremes*. Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city. There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins” (NIV; emphasis added).

The texts invite the reader to understand that true wisdom avoids two extremes: to be over-righteous or to be over-wicked, because both these contrasts bring destruction. The meaning of these two opposites is explained on the basis of the Hebrew parallelism: to be over-righteous means to be over-wise, and to be over-wicked equals with being a fool. Solomon does not intend to state that doing a little bit of wickedness is all right or being self-centered is within religious tolerance. The text itself states that there is no righteous human person, because we are all sinned (cf. Rom 3:23). Self-righteousness is ruled out completely because we are

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sinners. The parallel thoughts help to decipher the sense of these puzzling terms: what is behind being considered as over-righteous or over-wicked. One needs to ask: what is the biblical understanding of being a “fool,” or being “over-wise”?

The fool is defined in the Scriptures as a person who “says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who does good” (Ps 14:1 ESV; cf. 53:1). Solomon himself states that “doing wrong is like a joke to a fool, but wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding” (Prov 10:23 ESV). It means that fools live wickedly; they are actually over-wicked because they are oriented toward evil and doing harm to others to gain from it. They live according to their own views, without respect for God, His will and law. Such a life without God, with permissive attitudes and a worldly lifestyle is focused on the now and governed by reason. It can be characterized as liberalism or religious secularism.

If wisdom is defined as discernment between good and evil, and following what is right, then an “over-wise” person is one who is over-right or over-righteous as verse 16 states. In other words, over-wise people are self-centered, righteous in their own eyes, going beyond the biblical teaching of God’s Word, focusing on their piety, self-righteousness, overstressing their own experience, feelings, and over-emphasizing the requirements of the law and obedience as they interpret it. They are always right and others must do things according to their opinions otherwise they are not good or pious enough. Thus, this extreme position can be described as legalism. On the other pole is libertinism or liberalism. Both attitudes are self-centered and such egocentrism is always dangerous and deadly. These individuals lack the joy of life and inner peace. To play with the terminology of Solomon, one may say that on the one side are those who have “too much fear,” and on the other extreme are people who have “no fear of God.” However, true wisdom is marked by the “right dose of the fear of God,” which brings balance in life and acceptance of the fact that there is “not a righteous man on earth.”

The fear of God makes believers humble, and thus wise, and leads them to the elimination all kinds of extremism. On the one hand, they will avoid perfectionism (but accept the biblical teaching of perfection in Christ); on the other hand, they will escape a temptation to disregard discipline and God’s transparent instructions. Extremists fall into the trap of ultimately

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deciding by themselves what is right or wrong. Those who fear God depend on God's revelation which is not interpreted in isolation, partisanship, or destructive criticism.

Thus, wisdom shuns away from all kinds of fanaticism or stubbornness, because those who are wise listen carefully to others, and know that they do not know everything. The proper fear of the Lord leads to harmonious life in the loving Presence of God and avoids the overemphasis on the measurable externals, and avoids mechanistic or ritualistic religion. Relational religion is the only one which can satisfy and fulfill the needs of the broken human heart. This is why God calls His followers to this personal type of fellowship by bringing them to Himself and His teaching them (Exod 19:4; Joel 2:12; John 8:31; 12:32; 14:15; Rev 3:20).

Crucial Remarks

Either we fear God or our own fears will overcome us: "I also will choose harsh treatment for them and bring their fears upon them, because when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, they did not listen; but they did what was evil in my eyes and chose that in which I did not delight" (Isa 66:4 ESV). If we fear God, we do not need to fear anybody: "The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live" (Exod 1:17). Because these midwives feared God, they did not fear the Pharaoh of Egypt, and disobeyed him. This resistance was possible because they respected above all the living God. Because they were bowing before God, they had courage not to bow down before the mighty king. One can state that a person who kneels before God can stand tall before anyone without fear. David proclaims: "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (Ps 27:1 ESV). "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" (Ps 56:3–4 NIV).

Fearing God is the fruit of the Spirit, the result of the presence of the Holy Spirit in life. It is stated that Jesus Christ was filled with the Spirit of the Lord who was bringing the fear of the Lord into His life besides wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, and knowledge: "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the

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LORD” (Isa 11:2 NIV).

In the Bible, there is a close connection between the fear of God and joy. In a prophetic statement about the Messiah, the prophet Isaiah explains that “He will delight in the fear of the Lord” (Isa 11:3 NIV). Note carefully the following texts which connect happiness with God’s fear: “Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in his commands” (Ps 112:1). “Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways” (Ps 128:1). “Blessed is the one who fears the LORD always, but whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity” (Prov 28:14 ESV).

The fear of God is the best protection against sinning. When God brought His people Israel to Mount Sinai, He was not only liberating them from slavery and saving them from the influence of the Egyptian gods (Exod 12:12; 15:11; Num 33:4), but He actually was bringing them to Himself: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself” (Exod 19:4 NKJV). By His spectacular and majestic presentation of Himself on Sinai, He wanted to help them to stay out of sin. Moses expressed that very precisely: “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning” (Exod 20:20 NIV; see also Ps 36:1; Prov 3:7).

Conclusion

At the end of this biblical overview regarding the meaning of the divine imperative of fearing God, I have to underline that this study makes it clear that to fear God is not a concept God’s followers need to believe in, nor is it an activity one needs to add to a religious performance list because it is not our achievement. Neither is it a doctrine we should accept as true, but rather to fear God is a lifestyle, a daily walk with God.

Thus, the fear of God describes a religion. Jonah answered a question about who he was by saying: “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” (Jonah 1:9 ESV). It means he was worshipping the Creator God by fearing Him. In a similar way, Joseph said to his brothers: “Do this and you will live, for I fear God” (Gen 42:18 ESV). The principle characteristic of devoted people is that they fear God (Mal 3:16; 4:2). These believers are faithful to the covenant they entered into with God (Pss 25:14; 33:18; 103:11, 17; 111:5; 147:11).

There is no neutral ground—one either fears God or does not. God cannot accept external rituals and manipulations, playing to be godly and

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religious. True religion is a matter of our choice to follow God from our heart: “Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord” (Prov 1:28–29 ESV; see also Deut 6:5–6).

In reality, the scriptural appeal “fear God” is not a command. This imperative is His loving invitation to enter into a personal relationship with Him in order to enjoy His Presence in life. His friendship is something we cannot miss if we want to live a harmonious, balanced, and meaningful life. If we do it, then we return back to God’s original design for humanity according to the Creation pattern of Genesis 1–2, namely, to cultivate a relationship with God, live in total dependence on God, enjoy His Presence in life, and rely on His Word. This invitation is God’s welcome to live constantly in His Company. It is His beatitude for us resulting in the rich benefits of a transformed life.

In Psalm 139, David reflects on God’s Omnipresence and realizes that God knows everything and is everywhere. One cannot hide and should not live outside of His presence. Thus, David longed for the transforming Presence of God in his life, because God who knew him perfectly could change him. He desired that no evil thinking or feelings would be present in his life. The whole Psalm culminates with David’s special request in verses 23–24, which should be also our deep desire and prayer: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

God gives a beautiful promise for those who respect Him, love Him, and do their decisions in regard to Him: “Fear the LORD, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing” (Ps 34:9 NIV).

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