

The fear of God

“Do not let your heart envy sinners, but be zealous for the fear of the Lord all the day; For surely there is a hereafter, And your hope will not be cut off” (Proverbs 23:17, 18 NKJV).” “Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the Lord all the day. Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off” (Proverbs 23:17, 18 ESV).

The problem with humankind has always been the tendency to compare what you have with other people of your age group or just people in general. And the consequence of this continual competition is that we start to envy people, their accomplishments, their possessions, their looks, their success, their jobs, their wives, etc. But we must realize that people that don't know God only have the best of this life, sadly in the next life they will have nothing. If they die without Christ, their end will be dreadful. In a sense they have no bright future and their hope will be cut off. Christians should therefore not envy them, but be thankful for what God has given them. The opposite of envy is contentment and thankfulness.

We see in this text that God provides us with a promise. If we continue in the fear of God, if we walk in the fear of God, if we have the fear of God in our lives as an abiding reality, our hope will not be cut off. In other words as the writer tells us: there will surely be a hereafter. The fear of God is something that is very precious to have because with it there will be a future for us. The fear of God is not something you begin with and later in life discard as you become a mature believer in Christ. It is something that you must remain in, continue in, and treasure, etc. The fear of God is a loaded term, isn't it. Many people today say we shouldn't fear God. They say "fearing God" was something the people of God did in the Old Testament, but now we are in the New Covenant, and we have the Holy Spirit, so we don't have to fear God. And they have their proof texts ready. But what does the whole Bible reveal? What do the Old and New Testament reveal? Is there a contradiction in the Bible? Should we fear God today? Is it right for a believer in Christ Jesus to fear God? To answer these questions, we have to look at all the

Scriptures. Not a few proof texts. As the Reformers taught us: Scripture interprets Scripture. Firstly we are going to look at what the fear of God is not. Secondly, what it is. Thirdly we are going to consider the testimony of Scripture and fourthly at a summary of the benefits of the fear of God. And fifthly our conclusion. So let's start.

1. What it is the fear of God not?

Having the fear of God doesn't involve anxiety or panic attacks. It doesn't mean running away from God because of an experience of terror and consequently diving into sin. The fear of God doesn't lead to mental disorders. It doesn't make you psychologically unstable. It doesn't make you mentally sick, quite the opposite. The Bible tells us that we shouldn't fear man. Proverbs says: "The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe" (Proverbs 29:25 NKJV). Three texts in the New Testament are usually quoted in favor for not fearing God.

--"For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." (Romans 8:15 NKJV). If we look at the Scriptures in the Old Testament later, we will see that the fear of God never lead to any kind of bondage, quite the opposite. So Paul had to refer to something else. --And in 1 John 4, it is written: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18 NKJV). The ESV says: "By this is love perfected with us so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love" (1 John 4:17-18 ESV). Again if you look at the texts in the Old Testament, and you see the promises that resulted in having the fear of God you will find that it never ended in torment, precisely the opposite was the case! The people who didn't have the fear of God were the people that experienced torment and they were the ones heading for eternal destruction. Those who didn't fear God were called fools! Surely Paul and John didn't understand believers in Christ to be fools! Also, a text that is often quoted by believers to prove that we shouldn't

fear God is 2 Timothy 1:7 "God hasn't given us a spirit of fear but of love, power, and self-control." Again I believe that Paul is not speaking about not fearing God, but rather about an irrational fear for God, or the fear of man, that produces cowardice. The fear the apostles are speaking about that is not from God is the fear of death and eternal judgment. If you belong to God, you don't fear death or eternal judgment anymore, because God has given you the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of adoption and the gift of eternal life. As we will see later that the "fear of God" comes from the Holy Spirit and is in no way something negative.

So what do these texts actually mean? Not to fear God? We will see later that this is not the case. I propose that the fear Paul and John are referring to is the fear you would experience when a lion or a shark would attack you. That is what these texts are referring to. It is the fear that something horrific and terrible is going to happen to you. And what worse thing can happen to a person than to be eternally condemned and sent to hell? If you are not saved, you have reason to fear for your life. But if you are born again and a child of God you need not fear God this way. But the fact that God will send people to an eternity in hell should alarm us to fear God in another sense. People who reject God are in fact on their way to hell. They have reason to be terrified of God, because they will suffer eternal torment, eternal punishment and eternal bondage to their sinful self.

Nevertheless, Paul did mention knowing the terror of the Lord as the motive to persuade men to believe the gospel. Paul said: "For we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your conscience." (II Corinthians 5:10, 11 NKJV). But knowing this "terror" or fear drove him to do something positive for God and to obey Him. It didn't lead to experiencing torment, punishment or bondage, but it turned him to love his neighbor and to move in the power of the Holy Spirit.

So we must conclude that what Paul is saying about not having the spirit of fear but sonship refers to another fear than that what Jesus described in Matthew 10:28. Jesus explicitly commanded us to fear God. So did the apostles: Paul, Peter and John all spoke of the fear of God in a positive sense, as we will see later. There is no contradiction here but a sweet paradox. The term “fear” must be qualified. Moreover, when John speaks of the fact that perfect love drives out fear, he is not speaking about not having the fear of God in your life. If you read that verse in context, you will understand that he is talking about not fearing judgment day and running away from God and enjoying your sin because you think God is terrifying and horrible and indifferent and not worthy to be worshiped.

2. What is the fear of God?

Here follows a few observations from different definitions of “fear” from the Hebrew Lexicons and the English language.

-- **Hebrew definition:** 'yaw-ray'

Strong: A primitive root: to fear; morally to revere; causatively to frighten: - affright, be (make) afraid, dread (-ful), (put in) fear (-ful, -fully, -ing). (be had in) reverence (-end), terrible (act, -ness, thing).
Holiday: shudder, be in awe, hold in deference, revered, held in honor, be afraid. We see many times when God appeared to people He said to them to not be afraid. But when God stated that he most certainly did not mean, lose your respect for Him or don't honor Him, or don't worship Him, or do not be in awe of Him! I think four words that come closest to the meaning of fear are probably: Respect; reverence; awe and dread. Let's look at the variations in meaning.

--**Respect for God.** The Oxford dictionary defines respect as having deep admiration and esteem for something or someone. To respect God means to honor Him. To take heed that God is far superior to human beings in every respect and every person on the planet, including any living creature. God by far outweighs all our abilities and accomplishments put together. He is omnipotent, omnipresent and

omniscient and incomparable in all His perfections. Only that should make us bow down deep before God.

--**Reverence for God.** But not only respecting God but revering Him. Reverence according to the Oxford dictionary means to have deep respect. So reference goes deeper than respect. God is not only superior to us in His abilities to create, think, act and plan but He is morally perfect. He is holy and just and good beyond comprehension. He is sinless, incorruptible and unchangeable in all His perfections. This should make us revere God deeply. It should humble us, again and again, to know that God is righteous and good.

--**Awe for God.** Awe according to the Oxford dictionary is a combination of respect, fear, and wonder. Have you ever been in awe because of God because of His creation? The consequence of awe is most certainly worship.

--**Dread for God.** Dread means to fear greatly according to the Oxford dictionary. So here we have words that try to explain the Hebrew word "yaw-ray." Words could not completely describe what emotions we should have when we approach God, but it is clear that to fear God means to have a sense of deep respect and awe for Him. We will see from the Bible that "the fear of God" should result in a behavior change and a change in your feelings towards God and the way you think about Him. It should involve your whole person as we shall see when we look at different Scriptures.

How does the fear of God look like practically?

"Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. What man is there who desires life and loves many days, that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:11-14 ESV). In other words, to fear God includes to turn away from sin in all its forms and to pursue peace and what is good. The fear of God and repentance are intertwined. You cannot have the one without the other. But let's look at more Scriptures.

3. Scriptural evidence in Proverbs, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ecclesiastes, Matthew, Romans, Philippians, 1 Peter and Revelation

This is not an exhaustive list, but only selected passages.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:7 NKJV).

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; A good understanding have all those who do His commandments. His praise endures forever." (Psalms 111:10 NKJV) .

"The fear of the Lord is the instruction of wisdom, and before honor is humility." (Proverbs 15:33 NKJV).

"The fear of the Lord is to hate evil; Pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate." (Proverbs 8:13 NKJV).

"The fear of the Lord prolongs days, but the years of the wicked will be shortened" (Proverbs 10:27 NKJV).

"In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence, and His children will have a place of refuge" (Proverbs 14:26).

"The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death" (Proverbs 14:27 NKJV).

"In mercy and truth atonement is provided for iniquity; and by the fear of the Lord one departs from evil" (Proverbs 16:6 NKJV).

"The fear of the Lord leads to life, and he who has it will abide in satisfaction; He will not be visited with evil" (Proverbs 19:23 NKJV).

"Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling" (Psalms 2:11 NKJV).

"Who is the man who fears the Lord? Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose. His soul shall abide in well-being, and his offspring shall inherit the land" (Psalm 25:12, 13 ESV).

"The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant" (Psalms 25:14 NKJV).

"The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them" (Psalms 34:7 NKJV).

"Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; Blessed is the man who trusts in Him! Oh, fear the Lord, you His saints! There is no want to those who fear Him" (Psalms 34:8-9 NKJV).

"Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Who is the man who desires life, and loves many days, that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil and do good; Seek peace and pursue it" (Psalms 34:11-14 NKJV).

"As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him" (Psalm 103:13).

"But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children" (Psalms 103:17 NKJV).

"Blessed is every one who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways. When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears The Lord" (Psalms 128:1-4 NKJV).

"If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared" (Psalms 130:3, 4 NKJV)

"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14 NKJV).

"There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight is in the fear of the Lord, and He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, nor decide by the hearing of His ears" (Isaiah 11:1-3 NKJV).

"They shall be My people, and I will be their God; then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me" (Jeremiah 32:38-40 NKJV)

"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Do

not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:28, 31 NKJV).

"Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off (the Israelites) and you (believers in Christ) stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear" (Romans 11:20 NKJV).

"Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences" (II Corinthians 5:11 NKJV).

"Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (II Corinthians 7:1 NKJV).

"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12 NKJV).

"But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (I Peter 3:15 NKJV).

"The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come, And the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, and those who fear Your name, small and great, and should destroy those who destroy the earth" (Revelation 11:18 NKJV).

"Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people—saying with a loud voice, "Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water." (Revelation 14:6, 7 NKJV).

"They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying: "Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints! Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, For Your judgments have been manifested" (Revelation 15:3, 4 NKJV).

Then a voice came from the throne, saying, "Praise our God, all you His servants and those who fear Him, both small and great!" (Revelation 19:5 NKJV).

4. The Benefits of having the fear of God.

Here follows a summary of the benefits of having the fear of God:

-- You'll gain wisdom and knowledge (Proverbs 1; Ps 111). In Christ, we find the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3). The Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of wisdom and knowledge (Isaiah 11). You'll have a strong confidence (Proverbs 14). God is our confidence. You'll have a place of refuge (Proverbs 14). Jesus is our refuge! You'll have a fountain of life (Proverbs 14). Jesus is the Fountain of Life (John 4:11). It will turn you from the snares of death (Proverbs 14). It causes repentance. By it, one departs from evil (Proverbs 16). It causes repentance. It will lead to life (Proverbs 19). Jesus is the Life. (John 14:6). You shall dwell in satisfaction (Proverbs 19). Jesus is our satisfaction (John 6:35;7:37). You will not be visited with evil. (Proverbs 19). God will protect you. You'll be guided in God's way (Ps 25). God will show those who have it His covenant (Ps 25). His covenant of grace. The new covenant in the blood of Christ. The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him (Ps 25). The angel of the Lord encamps those who fear Him and will deliver them (Ps 34). Jesus Christ delivers like none can. There is no want for those who fear Him (Ps 34; Philippians 4:19) In Christ God will supply all our needs (Matthew 6:33). The souls of those who have it shall abide in well-being (Ps 25). Temporal and spiritual blessings. The offspring of those who have it shall inherit the land (Ps 25). Temporal blessings. The Lord pities those who fear Him (Ps 103). God's consolation will be experienced. The secret of God's counsel and covenant will be revealed to those who fear God (Ps 103). The mercy of the Lord will abide forever on those who fear God (Ps 103). Those who fear God shall eat the fruit of their labor, of their hands, and it will be well with them (Psalm 128). The wife of those who fear God will be like a fruitful vine and their children will be like olive plants (Ps 128). Because there is forgiveness with God only, we should fear God (Ps 130). With fearing God comes the grace to hate evil, arrogance and pride (Proverbs 8). Repentance is granted. Fearing God will prolong your days on earth (Proverbs 10). The hope and expectation of those who fear God will not be cut off. (Proverbs 23). Eternal life is granted. Fearing God is part of the essence of the Spirit of God (Isaiah 11). In other words, by fearing God, you partake of the Person of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ's delight is in the fear of

God (Isaiah 11). God will delight in you if you have it. God promises to give those in the new covenant the fear of God as an eternal reality (Jeremiah 32). In other words, you will be a partaker of the Holy Spirit and be born again of the Holy Spirit if it owns you. Those who have the fear of God will not depart from God (Jeremiah 32). Eternal life and perseverance in the faith are consequence for those who have it. Jesus commanded us to fear God because God has the power to throw people in hell for eternity (Matthew 10:30). Those who fear God will be rewarded after Judgement (Rev 11). Rewards in heaven await those who fear God.

5. Conclusion:

Our text commanded us that we should not envy sinners but remain and keep in the fear of the Lord **ALL** the day. Those who belong to the world, Satan and self, have many times the best of this life. They live in luxury and the temptation for Christians is to want the ease and comfort and riches they have, but they will not have a good future, except they repent and trust in the Savior Jesus Christ. Their hope will be cut off, and although they have a comfortable life now, they will have a miserable and horrific end. On the other hand, we are commanded to be in the fear of The Lord **ALL THE DAY**. That means we should continue in the fear of God all the time. Without it, we would not know God. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge. And knowledge and wisdom are described as part of the Spirit of God in Isaiah 11 and the treasures of wisdom and knowledge is found in none other than in Jesus Christ as is written in Colossians 2:3. So to remain in the fear of God means to abide in Christ Jesus (John 15:5) and to walk in the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:16). The fear of God is the beginning of our walk with God, the Spirit of God works it in us, and we are converted to God by it influencing our lives, but it is also something we must continue in. It is not something for baby Christians only. It leads to repentance and faith. It leads to life and the knowledge of God and should end in love for God and ultimately in the worship of God. If we remain in it, as our text commands us, in other words, if we are committed followers of Jesus Christ we can be assured that we will have a future, and we will spend the hereafter with God. Our expectation in the new heavens and the new earth will not be a dream

or fantasy. If we keep in the fear of God, if we remain in Christ we will have hope. As our text says our hope shall NOT be cut off. In our own strength, it is of course impossible to remain in the fear of God. We are weak, depraved and prone to wander, but God gave us the solution. The great comfort is that if we take part in the new covenant of God that Jesus Christ instituted at the last Supper 2000 years ago and affected on Golgotha with His own blood sacrifice, which we receive by repentance and faith by the working of the Holy Spirit, the fear of God WILL remain in us FOREVER as Jeremiah prophesied. God gave us this promise:

"They shall be My people, and I WILL be their God; then I WILL give them one heart and one way, that they may **FEAR ME FOREVER**, for the good of them and their children after them. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I WILL put **My fear** in their hearts so that they WILL NOT depart from Me" (Jeremiah 32:38-40 NKJV).

Therefore: "Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue, (remain) in the fear of the Lord all the day. Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off" (Proverbs 23:17, 18 ESV).