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SHE SHALL BE PRAISED

Verse 30

THE FEAR OF GOD

A few years ago it was popular with the news media to publicize professors and theologians who gained attention by saying “God is dead.” I tremble even as I write that blasphemous phrase, and think sorrowfully how pitiable are those who say such things. For this is the grand and awesome truth: God *is!* His most profound recorded words are “I AM THAT I AM” (Ex. 3:14). The greatest words of the hymn, “How Great Thou Art” are simply “Thou art.” Thou—the divine, almighty and infinite Being; art—endless and beginningless. It is mind-staggering to try to comprehend the Being of God.

In order to study “a women that feareth the Lord” we must first understand what it means to fear God. Probably most of us have never given much, if any, serious thought to this subject. I believe we would be amazed at the frequency of passages or verses in the Bible dealing with the fear of God, especially in the Psalms and Proverbs (see Ps. 89:7).

What *is* “the fear of God?” Charles Bridges (c. 1846) supplies this definition: “It is that affectionate reverence by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father’s law. His wrath is so bitter, and His love so sweet, that hence springs an earnest desire to please Him.”

Some versions of the Bible use the word “reverence” in place of “fear” when referring to the fear of God. It isn’t strong enough. God is not my pal, my buddy, the friendly and benevolent “Man upstairs,” or just “the Man from Galilee.” Certainly reverence is a part of this fear, but this interpretation is not consistent with those Scriptures which also include the word “tremble” for example. “Tremble thou earth at the presence of the Lord” (Ps. 114:7) and “My flesh trembleth for the fear of Thee; and I am

afraid of thy judgments” (Ps. 119:120) are two impressive statements. A far cry from mere reverence is Habakkuk’s fear in God’s presence (see Habakkuk 3:16). We cannot fully appreciate what it means to fear God if we dilute it to a kind of polite respect. We should think of the fear of God as a holy dread of displeasing Him.

This fear of God we speak of is not synonymous with terror, horror or alarm. God has not given us “the spirit of fear” (2 Tim. 1:7). Rather, it is a reverential awe born of the realization of who God is and what He is: the absolute and eternal creator, owner and ruler of the universe; infinite in holiness and power and knowledge; perfect in love and mercy and justice. This is an awesome concept. “Who shall *not* fear Thee, O Lord, and glorify Thy name” (Rev. 15:4). As we begin to understand who and what God is we learn to fear Him.

Job longed for a daysman between God and himself, one that could lay his hand upon them both. “...And let not his fear terrify me,” Job said (9:33–34). The fear of God should not terrify sinners forgiven through Christ, the Daysman, the God-man, but they should stand in solemn awe before Him (Ps. 33:8). Unforgiven sinners should quake in terror before the holy, powerful and just God of the universe. This kind of fear has torment, but the one who has received God’s love in Christ has had tormenting fear cast out of his life, because he has been made perfect, or complete, in God’s love (1 John 4:15–18).

Fear Man or God?

For the Christian there is a right and a wrong kind of fear. He *must* fear God and he must *not* fear man. Sometimes God does indeed use frightening situations to bring us to a fear of Himself; thereby we learn that it is He and He alone that we need and must fear. We can then say with David, “In God have I put my trust; I will not be afraid of what man can do unto me” (Ps. 56:11).

There are just two kinds of people in the world—those who fear God and do not fear man and those who fear man and do not fear God. Two evildoers were crucified with Christ, both were guilty, condemned, and both died. But one spends eternity in heaven; the other in hell. Because one feared God, admitted his guilt and that he was deserving of whatever punishment he received. He recognized righteousness in Christ, called Him “Lord” and acknowledged His kingship. The other malefactor feared only the men who were about to kill him and wanted Jesus somehow to get him down from that cross. Jesus promised the one who feared God that he would be with Him in Paradise that very day (see Luke 23:39–43).

Why Fear God?

Why should we fear God? We have said because of who He is, but there are more reasons. We should fear Him because *to do so pleases Him* (Ps. 147:11), and because it is our duty (Eccl. 12:13). This attitude of reverential awe is due the Creator from His creatures. And we should fear Him because of the many promises of blessings there are to those who do fear God. He expresses such a longing that His children would fear Him. Why? For their own good! “O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me and keep my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children forever!” (Deut. 5:29).

There are wonderful *promises of blessings* to those who fear God. Psalm 112, describing a person who fears God, has many similarities to Proverbs 31:10–31. In this psalm we see promises of wealth, enlightenment, honor, blessing and success to the offspring of the God-fearing person. We see that he is righteous, gracious, merciful, compassionate, discreet, generous, unafraid, stable and trusting in God.

In other places through the Bible we see promises of wisdom, prosperity, protection, goodness and happiness to those who fear God. I believe that my mother is a living example of one whose fear of the Lord has resulted in these and many other blessings, for she is “full of years,” in excellent health, is honored and esteemed, and her material needs are abundantly met. She has experienced ridicule and criticism for her stand, but the years have showered God’s blessings upon her, while her critics have crumbled.

Of all the reasons to fear God the most compelling is *taught by Jesus* in these words: “And I say unto you my friends, be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear Him which after He hath killed hath power to cast into Hell; yea, I say unto you, fear Him” (Luke 12:4–5). But to those who do fear God Jesus says “Fear not...” (verse 7). What a paradox—fear and fear not. But it is one we have encountered before and we shall encounter again. After Moses received the ten commandments the people saw a fearsome sight—thunderings and lightnings and a smoking mountain. Moses said to them, “Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that His fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not” (Ex. 20:18–20). The only escape from fear, that is terrible and tormenting, is *in fear*—of God.

Fear Works Obedience

What is the practical manifestation of the fear of God? The phrase from Exodus 20:20, “that ye sin not,” points us to the answer to that question, which is, in a word, obedience. We should learn this formula:

Fear = Obedience = Blessing

Or, fear produces obedience which brings blessings. Recalling the verse from Deuteronomy we see a perfect illustration of this formula: “Fear me...keep commandments...well with them.”

In order to obey God, we study His Word to learn what He requires and desires of us. As we study it more and more we agree with David who said, “My heart standeth in awe of Thy word” (Ps. 119:161). In Proverbs 13:13 there is a promise of reward to those who fear the commandment—and a threat of destruction to those who despise it. There are other references to those who tremble at the Word of God, including Ezra 9:4 and Isaiah 66:5. To fear God is also to fear His Word.

I once had the privilege of spending some time with a missionary who was associated with the ministry in India begun by Amy Carmichael. As we discussed the amazing life of Miss Carmichael I wondered aloud how it was that God seemed to bless and use certain of His children in such unusually effective ways. “In her case,” my missionary friend said, “I believe it was because of her quick obedience to all she knew to be the will of God.” Think of that—*quick* obedience! Yes, God really blesses and uses us when we consistently follow His will with no hesitation, no arguing, no complaining (see Ps. 119:60).

God’s Way—Not Ours

We have seen many Scripture proofs that God blesses those who fear Him. Yet all of us know from personal experience or observation that there are saints who love and fear and serve God but who are not blessed with wealth, health, position or other benefits promised to those who fear God. There are two things we should remember. One is that God looks on the heart and we can only see the outside of a person. No one could have suffered more than Job; yet God has said that he was perfect, upright and feared God (Job 1:1). But there was pride that needed to be dealt with and Job himself said, “When He hath tried me I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). The other and more important consideration is the sovereignty of God. We must let God be God. His ways are not our ways—they are deep and high and unsearchable. We cannot question when we see God-fearing Christians suffering troubles and trials, for we know not God’s purposes—we only know they are perfect (see Isa. 55:8–9 and Rom. 11:33).

We read in the third chapter of Malachi these words: “Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and thought upon His name.” Then God speaks so lovingly and tenderly of those who fear Him, saying, “...they shall be mine...in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him...unto you that fear my name shall the sun of Righteousness arise with healing in His wings...” (Mal. 3:16–17, 4:2).

The key to this study and the secret of the exemplary life of the godly woman described in Proverbs 31:10–31 is embodied in the statement: “A woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised” (vs. 30). Popularity and good looks may bring temporary fulfillment and happiness, but the godly God-fearing woman has an abiding peace and joy and receives deserved, sincere praise. This praise is the affirmation of her faithfulness to the role for which God created her, by those who know her most intimately—her husband and her children—and by the works of her hands. For she has learned to “serve God with reverence and godly fear” (Heb. 12:28).

Being in the fear of the Lord is a way of life, for which we find plain instruction in Proverbs 23:17: “Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long.”

Probing Proverbs 31 Study Questions

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised, Proverbs 31:30.

PRAYER: Ask God to take away your preconceived ideas and to teach you from His Word about “the fear of the Lord.”

1. Read Proverbs 31:10–31. Memorize Proverbs 31:30 (use the translations above so that you can recite this verse with the group).
2. Write the first thoughts or feelings you have when you consider the phrase “fear of the Lord.”

3. In your opinion, why should a study of Proverbs 31 begin with verse 30?
4. Is the fear of God a commandment? (See Deuteronomy 6:13.)
5. Read Deuteronomy 10:12–22. Make a list of who God is, what God does, and some of His names. Write any other thoughts and reflections you have about this passage.
6. List the reasons the text gives that we should fear God.
7. What does the fear of the Lord produce in our lives?
8. If we do not fear God, whom do we fear? (See Proverbs 29:25.)
9. Read Psalm 112 and list the similarities with Proverbs 31.
10. Write your personal definition of the fear of the Lord.
11. What have you learned in this lesson that will produce a change in your life?