

What Does “Fear of the Lord” Mean?

Wednesday Meditation | May 27, 2020

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Psalm 99

There’s this phrase in the Bible that tends to kind of freak people out: “**Fear of the Lord.**” And we can’t just forget about it, because it’s one of those phrases that appears over and over again, throughout the books of the Bible.

Many of the heroes of the Bible are described as fearing the Lord. Joseph, Job, the midwives who saved Hebrew babies in Egypt, early Christians in the book of Acts, people who strive to follow God – they are all described as fearing the Lord.

But what’s more, in scripture we are often *told* to fear the Lord:

In many places we hear that “the **fear of the Lord** is the beginning of wisdom” (cf. Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 1:7, 9:10)

In Proverbs we hear: “The **fear of the Lord** is a fountain of life,” and “The **fear of the Lord** is life indeed; filled with it one rests secure and suffers no harm.” (Prov. 14:27, 19:23).

When someone is baptized, we quote from the prophet Isaiah, praying for “the Spirit of knowledge and the **fear of the Lord**” (Isaiah 11:2).

And that’s just brushing the surface of the Bible recommending we “fear the Lord.” And as the books of the Bible use this phrase, it’s very clear that we’re supposed to understand “fear of the Lord” as a good thing. But don’t we hear that word “fear” and feel it as a bad thing? Or, at the very least, a confusing thing?

I know I’ve had many conversations with folks wondering what exactly “fear of the Lord” is supposed to mean. And I think it’s a question that comes up so often because fearing God sounds like the opposite of so many of the other messages we get in Church – and in the Bible:

Martin Luther taught that we are to be convinced in our hearts that we have forgiveness of sins and peace with God by grace alone (*Commentary on Galatians*).

“The Psalms say: The Lord our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Psalm 103:8).

And we love to sing: “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!”

So fearing the Lord – that sounds like the very thing we’re trying to leave behind as we learn to trust God and the grace of God!

So sometimes in these conversations, when we’re trying to suss out what exactly it means to fear God, we say something like, “‘Fear’ doesn’t mean be afraid of God, it’s more like *respect*,” and that definitely points us in the right direction. But I’ve been starting to think: maybe that’s too light of an understanding – at least, depending on our definition of “respect.”

Fearing God is tied to recognizing God’s holiness. And holiness is more than being good and pure and perfect. Acknowledging God as “holy” means being overwhelmed by how great and powerful and utterly unique God is. It means standing in awe of how totally beyond us God is. It means taking in that we are mortal and fragile and limited; that it is not us, but God, who really has power and wisdom and goodness.

I’ve heard people use the analogy of the sun: the sun is the biggest and most powerful thing in our solar system. There is nothing else even remotely like it in our corner of the universe. It is an indispensable source of life.

It is also dangerous. Even here on earth, 92 million miles away from the sun, if we spend too much time outside, the sun can burn us and leave us hurting for days. It can do serious, lasting damage to our skin. We’re not even supposed to look at the sun. But the sun isn’t dangerous because it’s evil or out to get us – it’s dangerous because of all the things that make it good and life-giving. Its light. Its heat.

God is like the sun, but more. Totally different than anything else we know. The source of all life. Powerful in ways we can’t even imagine. And dangerous to us because of that power, that goodness, that other-ness. Dangerous to our egos, to our way of life. God is bigger and more incomprehensible than anything; God is beyond everything in the universe.

That’s what we’re confessing when we call God “holy.”¹

And when we really recognize God as holy – as powerful, as totally beyond us, as dangerous because of God’s goodness – that is when we fear God.

We’re living in terrible times. Times of uncertainty, anxiety, fear. Times of poverty, sickness, and death. COVID-19 is something we don’t understand and don’t have

1 “Holiness,” *The Bible Project*, 17 May 2015. Available online: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/holiness/> or on YouTube. Accessed 26 May 2020.

control over. It makes us feel small and weak and powerless. In a way, this pandemic is reminding us of all the painful, embarrassing truths about being human that we strive to overcome.

But when we do feel small and powerless, the Spirit leads us to lift our eyes and hearts to our holy God. The one who is not overpowered by a virus. The source of all wisdom. The power we cannot comprehend.²

And when we recognize that holy God, may sit for a few breaths in that truest moment of fear of the Lord.

And then may we find comfort as we start to remember the things we do know about our holy, transcendent God: God chooses to bind even God's holiness to God's love for us and for all creation. God is not only beyond us; God is with us. God cares for us. The one power in the universe that is entirely beyond this terrible situation – that power looks on us with compassion and works great works among us now.

Fear the Lord. Remember that God is holy. *And* remember all the stories of God at work for good in this world. And so, take heart.

A reading from the Psalms:

The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble!
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!
The LORD is great in Zion;
he is exalted over all the peoples.
Let them praise your great and awesome name.
Holy is he!
Mighty King, lover of justice,
you have established equity;
you have executed justice
and righteousness in Jacob.
Extol the LORD our God;
worship at his footstool.
Holy is he!
Moses and Aaron were among his priests,
Samuel also was among those who called on his name.
They cried to the LORD, and he answered them.
He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud;

² Walter Brueggemann, "Reaping the Whirlwind," in *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2020).

they kept his decrees,
and the statutes that he gave them.

O LORD our God, you answered them;
you were a forgiving God to them,
but an avenger of their wrongdoings.

Extol the LORD our God,
and worship at his holy mountain;
for the LORD our God is holy.

(Psalm 99)