

Fear God: What Does it Mean?

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 19, #48 November 28, 2004

There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil. (Job 1:1)

Most of us hold to a dreadfully flawed concept of the fear of God. Ask most believers to define what they understand by "the fear of God," and you will quickly grasp my point. The common idea imputes to God a variety of traits that Scripture does not allow.

The poetic books of the Old Testament contain more references to the fear of God than any other section of Scripture. The whole Bible reflects any number of thematic emphases that attract our attention. For example, if you want to study the doctrine of hell, you will discover that the gospels, particularly Jesus' words, say more about hell than any other section of Scripture. The question of Christian suffering finds distinct emphasis in Peter's first epistle.

We will examine the concept of the fear of God in the Old Testament poetic books to develop our thoughts regarding this doctrine. English poetry follows certain rules of metered lines (a pattern of syllables in each line) and rhyming word sounds at the end of each line. Unlike English poetry, Hebrew poetry follows the concept of rhyming ideas. When reading them, pay special note to parallel clauses. Instead of reading various ideas that expand a concept, you are reading a focused explanation of a single idea. Through the next several chapters we will look specifically at a number of passages that illustrate this idea. Job, the first of the poetic books of the Old Testament, begins with a description of the character of Job. We do not know where the ancient land of Uz was located, nor do we know precisely when the book of Job was written. Generally, Bible scholars hold that Job was written earlier than the first five books of the Old Testament that were written by Moses (ca. 1500 B. C.).

Let's examine the opening verse of Job to assess the character of this unusual man and to learn what we may of the nature of the fear of God. This simple verse tells us three things about Job's character.

1. He was perfect and upright. The idea of perfection does not imply moral sinless perfection. The Hebrew word translated "perfect" is defined; "...perfect, complete. 1A complete, perfect. *IAI* one who lacks nothing in physical strength, beauty, etc. 1B sound, wholesome. *IBI* an ordinary, quiet sort of person. 1C complete, morally innocent, having integrity. *ICI* one who is morally and ethically pure."15[1] The word translated "upright" carries the idea of straight, indicating that Job was honest and straightforward in his character.

2. He feared God. For the moment we'll hold our thoughts on this point.

3. He eschewed evil. "Eschewed" is a Middle English word that indicates avoidance. Job avoided evil. He consistently lived his life so as to avoid evil conduct.

Now let's apply the Hebrew poetic theme of rhyming ideas to this verse. It suggests that there is a distinctly moral quality to the fear of God. Fearing God appears in our attitude toward moral conduct, particularly our own personal conduct.

As we observed in our brief discussion of love, we have corrupted and distorted the love of God to refer to an emotional or sentimental concept rather than to a conscious act of the will. I suggest that we have similarly distorted our ideas of the fear of God. While trying to define the fear of God in terms of the emotion of fear, we struggle with the idea that a leading idea of the concept refers to one's moral conduct and attitudes. If we embrace these aspects of fear, we must move toward moral choices and the function of our wills in the choices that we make. Thus the parallel between our distortion of God's

love and of our fear of God is striking. If we truly fear God as set forth in Scripture, we will avoid sinful situations and choices. We will strive to maintain personal purity, a decision that must begin in the mind. We tend, somewhat simplistically at times, to divorce our control of our minds from our conduct. Scripture takes us down the opposite path. Whatever we do originates in our minds. The dominant ideas that we allow to occupy our minds will inevitably surface in our actions.

The whole book of Job documents this incredible man's life and faith through life-shattering disappointments and losses. He lost family and fortune. He had to live with superficial and judgmental attitudes from friends who sought to comfort him with platitudes and irrelevant accusations that all his pain resulted from some secret sin. Some scholars interpret the book of Job so as to make Job become self-righteous and defensive. Others view the book so as to maintain Job's high character. Regardless of our view, Job maintained an admirable sense of godliness throughout his trial. Wasn't that the point that God made in the dialogue with Satan?

So what does this mean for you and me? How does it become a functional truth for our life in the twenty first century? I offer several points for your consideration.

1. Whether Job became self-righteous or not, he maintained a sense of faith in his God that did not waiver. Job's faith did not stand or fall based on his retirement fund or on the comforts of life. Job treasured family and fortune, but he did not worship them.
2. Another way of saying much the same thing is that Job's faith rested on his belief in the character of God, not on the status of family or fortunes. For us, circumstances often invade and color our faith far more deeply than they should. How often do we hear sincere believers make comments that blame other people or difficult circumstances for their failures of faith? A financial setback or a friend who disappoints us does not rise to the level that we should step back from our faith.
3. We prove our fear of God by the moral and ethical choices that we make. A person who fears God will avoid the moral and ethical low ground of relativism, of personal desire or choices over Biblical teaching. Fear of God will not motivate us to seek alternatives to Biblical teaching, however profoundly it confronts our personal attitudes and conduct. "The Bible doesn't say anything about this idea, so I'm free to think whatever I wish about it," is often the motto of the believer who fails to live according to the fear of God. One who truly fears God looks for guidance in Scripture for acceptable ideas and practices rather than looking for escape hatches to avoid Scriptural leadership.

In his book *The Mystery of God's Will* Charles Swindoll offers some pertinent thoughts to our consideration of the fear of God, grounded in our belief in God and in the faithfulness of His character. Job's life exemplifies this reliable truth. Our fear of God, our love for Him, and our trust in Him can be trusted without doubt. Unbiblical fear of God is typically based on faulty concepts regarding His essential character.

"Why is it important for us who seek His will to know that our God is holy? First of all, *His holiness assures us that He is absolutely trustworthy*. Being holy, He will never take advantage of His children; He will never abuse us, He will never manipulate us, and He will never lead us astray. His will may seem mysterious, but it's never wrong. This holy Being who is sinless cannot do wrong. You and I can trust Him to do only what is right at all times.

"Second, *His holiness guarantees that He has no deceitful agenda, no questionable motives*. When God leads you into His will, you never have to wonder: Will this backfire? Will this somehow work against me? His holy will is free of question.

"Third, *His holiness represents a model of perfection*. Our God has not one flaw, hidden or observed, unwritten or recorded.

“In an earlier chapter I mentioned that God will never tempt us to sin, not even indirectly.16[2]”

Elder Joe Holder

