

Fear God: Jesus' Example—Our Blessing

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee. Ye that fear the LORD, praise him; all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify him; and fear him, all ye the seed of Israel. For he hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he cried unto him, he heard. My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation: I will pay my vows before them that fear him. The meek shall eat and be satisfied: they shall praise the LORD that seek him: your heart shall live for ever. All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the LORD: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee. For the kingdom is the LORD'S: and he is the governor among the nations. All they that be fat upon earth shall eat and worship: all they that go down to the dust shall bow before him: and none can keep alive his own soul. A seed shall serve him; it shall be accounted to the Lord for a generation. They shall come, and shall declare his righteousness unto a people that shall be born, that he hath done this. (Ps 22:22-31)

When we turn to Ps 22, our first interpretational task is to drop anchor into the glorious—and gloriously deep—waters of Jesus' Incarnation and suffering. The psalm begins with Jesus' words on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The whole psalm takes on a prophetic disposition as it leads us through Jesus' private thoughts during His time on the cross. This point alone makes the psalm one of the most incredible passages of the whole Bible. We are allowed into the private thoughts of God Incarnate at His epochal moment in His mission and in our salvation.

Further, the writer of the Hebrew letter quotes Ps 22:22 (Heb 2:12). Most of the Bibles that I have on my desk show a paragraph break that begins at verse 22, so on the assumption that paragraphs as we know them are relevant to Hebrew poetry, we may begin our study with the idea that verse 22 states the major point of the last movement in the poem/ancient hymn. The succeeding verses unpack the idea and give it dimension.

We should also consider that the primary source of these words is Jesus' thoughts, not David's prophecy. Before we begin to apply the passage to ourselves, we should clearly orient our minds to their primary context.

In many circles of Christian thought it might seem a bit strange to assert that Jesus "feared." However, the Hebrew writer specifically affirms this point (Heb 5:7). In that passage the Father's hearing Jesus when He prayed is attributed to His fear, "...and was heard in that he feared."

In this amazing lesson Jesus—albeit in prophecy—turns his interest to others, not to His incredible (excruciating; "out of the cross") suffering on the cross. He urges "Ye that fear the LORD" to praise Him. He adds that we are to both glorify and to fear God. Briefly Jesus returns to His personal task, "I will pay my vows before them that fear him."

What is it about fearing God that leads us from fear to worship and to personal acts that glorify Him? We can hardly find a logical basis for these progressions in the typical idea that fearing God means either to fear the bad consequences of our sins or generally to view God with a paralyzing and morbid fear. As challenging as this passage is to our study, it is also highly informative.

Dr. Tom Constable summarizes the logical sequence of the passage. "In view of the Lord's deliverance David vowed to praise God publicly. God saved His Son from death just as He delivered the psalmist from it. In the latter case He did so by prolonging his life and in the former by resurrection. The writer of Hebrews quoted this verse in Heb 2:12 as an expression of the Lord Jesus' praise to God for

delivering Him from death in answer to His prayer (cf. Heb 5:7).”¹⁹[1] Constable blends David’s personal narration in the verse alongside Jesus’ fulfilling experience on the cross.

Take time to read these verses several times. Then make a list of the words that come to mind as rough equivalents to the idea of the fear of God that appears in these verses. The first word that came to my mind was “respect.” Considering the full content of the psalm and Jesus’ work on my behalf, I am overwhelmed at His amazing dedication to His divine assignment. I hold men who stick to their assignment faithfully in high regard. Anyone can start a noble venture and become distracted. It takes a special person to take on a difficult task and stick to it through “thick or thin.” I love Him for what He did. Indeed I hope that I “worship” Him both for who He is and for what He did on my behalf. But behind all of these activities this idea of profound respect stands out. This is the kind of man I want to rub shoulders with. I want this kind of man as my friend. If I were faced with a difficult business task, I’d want this kind of man on board with me to ensure success in the assignment. Interestingly, that is precisely what we have available to us in our Christian walk. We need to take Jesus with us through our business and personal challenges. No, do not treat Him as a mystical and magical mantra of sorts, something of a magical word that chases away all of your problems and makes every day trouble-free. Often in Scripture He leads His people through troubles to the path of spiritual growth. Can we overlook that Heb 11 presents a significant list of people who faced and survived incredible hardships “by faith” (Heb 11:35-39).

We find it a bit strange to “take Jesus with us to work” every day, but, when we keep our lives enriched in Scripture and in our studies of His noble example, we set the stage for just such an event. When we dare to draw on Scripture’s teachings to guide us through the maze of decisions and judgments that daily life forces upon us, we in fact do take Him with us into our daily activities. True discipleship is not a mystical fantasy of Jesus when we need to work our way through problems. True discipleship graciously and trustingly faces life’s darkest problems with Jesus and His very practical, literal teachings from Scripture immersed into our minds, using them to flavor the decisions that we make in every facet of life.

I have to confess that I’m something of a “worry wart.” When difficulties come, my first and most natural reaction is to think that the worst possible thing that could occur will in fact happen. Similarly, the Pollyanna Christian who avoids every problem with Scarlet O’Hara’s, “Oh well, I’ll think of it tomorrow,” needs this truth to grab them by the lapel and pull them back into reality. Whether we are pessimistic or Pollyanna, we need our Lord’s personal example of fearing God to instruct our faith in the moment of trial.

Occasionally my wife and I have interesting philosophical discussions about the impact of Christian faith and preaching on people. Can you in fact so influence people that they truly modify their natural personality and bent to make their nature respond to life more like Scripture teaches? I believe that this is not only possible, but that the power for such transformation lies at the heart of the New Testament’s teaching regarding the divine intent of the gospel. It is not my teaching that lays a major load of guilt onto someone and drives them to a superficial appearance of change. It is not that my words are so profound as to overwhelm and alter a person’s worldview. If the gospel is—as Ro 1:16 asserts—God’s power to save believers (not the typical teaching that it is God’s power to save unbelievers), I must preach it, fully expecting and believing that God can and does use it to transform the lives of people who hear it with heart-ears. I must confess that I am occasionally discouraged when I preach to people over a prolonged period who listen, pay lip service to the teachings, and claim to be believers, but who never display any evidence of transformed lives. However, I can also celebrate those occasions when I preach it and see in a life here and there a true and delightful transformation. A “pedestrian” Christian miraculously grows into the stature of a mature believer in Christ and makes a difference, first in his/her own life, and then in the lives of others. We cannot embrace the New Testament message of the

gospel without also embracing the fact that God's power, as seen and put to work through the preaching of the gospel, can indeed transform lives.

I ask each of you this personal question. Looking over the years of your profession of faith in Christ, have you been transformed or merely petrified into a stubborn and unyielding rock that always responds to gospel exhortations with "This is just the way I am; I can't change"? What will the real message of your life be? When the preacher delivers your funeral sermon, what will be the sermon of your life that people in the audience will recall on that day?