

Fear of God

by Valsan Thampu

The fear of God is a healthy and empowering fear that promotes a purposeful and upright life, and is essential for our health and wholeness.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 10:12, Psalm 46:1, Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 1:7, Proverbs 8:13, Proverbs 14:26, Isaiah 6:1, John 15:4, Ephesians 6:4, 1 John 4:18, Revelation 3:20

Topics: "Fear Of God", "Spiritual Wisdom"

Description

Valsan Thampu preaches on the importance of fearing the Lord, emphasizing that the fear of God empowers and liberates us from the fear of men, leading to a life of purpose and wisdom. He highlights that true fear of the Lord is rooted in love for Him, casting out worldly fears, and enabling us to walk in His ways. The sermon delves into the consequences of not fearing God, drawing insights from biblical figures like Pharaoh and Isaiah, and stresses the significance of instilling the fear of the Lord in children for a foundation of wisdom and spiritual vitality.

Transcript

And Now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the Lord's commandments and His decrees that I am giving you today for your good? [Deuteronomy 10:12-13]

He who fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge. The fear of Lord is a foundation of life, turning a man from the snares of death. [Proverbs 14:26-27]

Fearing God is just about the most unwelcome prospect to the sensibilities of our times. This is not because fear is alien to us. Modern life is marked by fear. T. S. Eliot defines the human predicament as 'fear in a handful of dust'[1]. Fear has reached nearer, farther, higher and deeper in human life today than ever before. We fear just about everyone and everything. We accept fear as the given. Yet it sounds so strange that we should fear God at all.

Why is this so?

Jesus provides a clue, "Do not fear men," He exhorts His disciples, "fear God". By bringing together the two fears - fear of men and fear of God - Jesus indicates they are related, and how. Those who fear men

will not fear God, and vice versa. The fear of men enslaves. The fear of God empowers. It liberates us from the fear of men, which compromises our dignity, stifles our freedom and erodes the integrity and purpose of our life.

This brings us to the central paradox in fear. It is not because we are above fear that we disdain to fear God. Disclaiming fear of God does not prove that we are brave. It is because we are fearful we fear just about everything else - that we do not fear God. This truth deserves a closer look.

Our piety does not prove that we fear God. The truth could well be the opposite. A fear-driven religiosity will readily confess, "God is my refuge" [Psalms 46:1]. It is good that we acknowledge God as our refuge. But it is neither good nor fair that God is for us nothing more than a refuge. To most people, the word 'refuge' carries undertones only of danger. It is fear that forces a person to seek refuge. In that event, we would not need God when the danger departs. Give a good thought of this: why does Jesus invite us to 'abide in Him'? [John 15:4] Does He offer protection from fear? No, what He offers is fruitfulness. We hardly ever associate fruitfulness with 'refuge'. God as a refuge from fear is quite a different prospect from God as a fruitfulness. It is fear of the latter kind that is akin to the ethos of the Kingdom of God.

In the kingdom of man, it is sufficient to fear the consequences of wrong-doing. But the fact that we avoid wrong-doings does not mean that we do what is right. It ensures, at best, a sterile life in which culpable offences are avoided. While this is helpful, it is not sufficient in the Kingdom. There living a fruitless life is an offence. Remember the fig tree that withered under the curse of Jesus for its barrenness? The tree that does not produce good fruit, says John the Baptist, will be cut down and burned. Jesus underlines this idea more elaborately. He is the vine and we are the branches. The branches that abide in the vine become fruitful. Those that produce no fruit will be cut down and burned. God is, thus, not a refuge from self-indictment of living a purposeless and fruitless life. To seek refuge in God is to lead an upright, dignified and purposeful life. Any deviation from this narrow path activates the fear of Lord. Fear of the Lord urges and enables us to walk the way of the Lord. It is this, and not fears per se, that makes us wise. Fear of the Lord is not wisdom. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It sets you in course for wisdom.

Fear-driven religiosity is not the same as the fear of God. Only those who love God can fear Him. Love, not fear, is the foundation of spirituality. God is the fullness of love; and to love Him is to experience the fullness of love. Fullness of love casts out fear: all worldly fears, including the fear of men [1 John 4:18] As long as we are not delivered from these fears, we will not fear God. When we turn to God only to be safe from the troubles and pains of this world, from the malignant dispositions of stars and starlets, demons and globins, it is not God we fear. We fear calamities and treat God as a tool of convenience. We may take the name of God and even cry out to Him. But that is not because we fear God but because we fear what could happen to us, if we don't. The moment the cause for fear departs, we begin to take God for granted. Religion of fear and fear of God are contrary to each other!

The Pharaoh of Egypt is a classic illustration of the fact that fears of afflictions has nothing to do with the fear of God. Each time a pestilence comes upon him, he succumbs to fear. Fear forces him to 'repent'. He agrees to let the people go. But as soon as the pestilence vanishes, his heart hardens. He goes back on his promise to set the people free. He fears the pestilences, but has no fear of God. Significantly, it is because he has no fear of God that pestilences have to come upon him, one after the other. Some significant insights into fearing God can be derived from what Pharaoh does and what undoes him.

It is impossible to 'fear the Lord' without knowing Him. Fear is related to knowledge. We fear a snake, for instance, because we know that it is poisonous and, hence, lethal [2]. We do not fear people unknown to us with whom we have nothing to do. Pharaoh knew not the living God, who was sensitive to the suffering of the people, zealously committed to justice and eager to intervene on behalf of the oppressed. Given this, it is not surprising that he tried to play 'hide and seek' with God! As compared to Pharaoh our conduct is even less excusable; for we claim to know God and yet have no fear of Him [3].

Without the fear of God no human being can repent and change his ways. People persist with their ungodly ways, as long as they are not stung by the liberating fear of God. The fear of the Lord accounts for the difference between Sodom and Gomorrah, the bywords for ungodliness, invited destruction upon themselves. The great city of Nineveh listened to Jonah, experienced the fear of the Lord, repented and avoided its date with doom.

Not to fear God is to hurtle from one den of fear to another. The choice of Pharaoh was between fearing God and fearing pestilences. Differences in degrees notwithstanding, this pattern applies to us as well. By forfeiting the fear of God, we harden our hearts and conduct ourselves in ways that bring senseless troubles upon us. Pharaoh was clearly informed about God's will concerning the people. But he made light of it. Such a person will take only pestilences seriously. God had to speak to him through calamities, which was the only language, sadly, that he could understand.

We will not seek justice, so long as we lack the fear of God. It is not because we do not know what justice is that we fail to do it. It is because we lack the fear of God. Archbishop William Temple of Canterbury used to say, "I am a man honest enough to want to buy a railway ticket. But it is the thought that there is a ticket collector at the end of the journey that makes me actually to buy the ticket." Fear of the Lord is the ticket for the journey of life, and it is unwise to undertake it ticket-less.

Pharaoh was not deficient in fear. He was deficient in love. He loved neither God nor human beings. The fear of God presupposes love for Him. Loving God necessarily includes fearing Him. It is because we do not love God, or love Him as we ought, that we resent His wrath.

Given how rudely the idea of fearing God jars on modern sensibilities, it would have been politically correct to exclude it from the symphony of these meditations. We would have, if only we could. But it is so central to the ethos of the Kingdom that avoiding it would be like building a mansion without a door to enter it. One cannot be a subject of the Kingdom without loving the Lord; and loving the Lord perforce includes fearing Him.

But that is not how it seems to us. We are happy that God is love. But it troubles us that God is also wrathful. The universal truth, though, is that whatever is dynamic harmonizes the opposites. Day includes night. Wheat and tares grow up together. We hold love and hate in our heart. Ask a little child, and she will tell you that anger is not out of place in parental love. Only mechanical love - love as a mask - excludes anger. The more a parent loves her child the greater her indignation be when the child misbehaves. Apathy to personal degradation does not prove love, but the absence of it. To expect mercy from God, without leaving a margin for His wrath, is to degrade God into a lifeless thing, a convenient mask.

Prophet Isaiah contrasts significantly with Pharaoh in respect of the fear of God. Fear overwhelms the Prophet in the presence of God (Isaiah 6:1-8) The thing to note is that this fear has a positive outcome. It results in Isaiah's willingness to serve God; "Here I am, Send me". Two factors contribute to this. First: Isaiah's knowledge of God's awesome holiness. Second: his acute awareness of his own uncleanness.

The fear of God involves a dual knowledge: who God is and, in comparison what we have to become. God is holy, and we are unclean. This awareness is the moment of truth. Fear of God is awe concerning God's holiness. More accurately, it is the fear instilled by God's holiness vis-à-vis one's uncleanness. Strictly speaking, it is not God's holiness that we fear. It is the prospect of being alienated from God that awakens fear in us. Fear of this kind proves our need to be in communion with God. Hence the paradox: fear of dangers makes us flee from them, but the fear of God draws us closer to Him. This fear overcomes alienation. Alienation is a breeding ground for foolishness. So, the Psalmist is right after all: the fear of the Lord is indeed the beginning of wisdom.

NOTES:

Fear is at the root of fallenness. Fear entered human psyche, according to the biblical account, through sin and alienation. It is gone deep into nature.

Fear of this kind is quiet different from the fear of the Lord. All worldly fears are negative. They cause us to flee from what we fear. The fear of Lord is positive. It empowers. It enables us to be one with Him. It depends on our love for Him and deepens that love.

Actually it is doubtful if we know God. We know about God. It is possible to combine 'knowing about God' with 'not fearing God'. It is impossible to know God and still not fear Him, as He deserves to be. The fact that we have no fear of God proves that we do not know Him.

The Word is meant to help us to know and love God. Knowledge of God instills wholesome fear of God. For that to happen, we need to accept the authority of the Word. That we won't do, so long as we relate to the Word selectively. The problem is that we have our favorite passages, beyond which we rarely go! What are they like? They are the passages that portray the convenient aspect of God. Partial knowledge about God falls short of knowing God. Selective reading of the Bible promotes only informed ignorance. It serves to inhibit, rather than activate, the fear of God. Isaiah's awareness, in the wake of encountering God, creates an eager willingness to do the work of God. This mission motivation is the first fruit of the fear of God. The proof that we fear the Lord is that we walk in the way of God. To walk in the way of Lord is to become a co-worker with God. That is because God is not, primarily, a walker but a worker.

The experience of Isaiah affords yet another insight. The fear of the Lord involves not only an awareness of the nature of God but also a relationship with Him. God's holiness, together with our uncleanness, need not awaken fear if we are not with Him. Nearness is the catalyst for fear. What activities the fear of the Lord is the awareness that we are in His presence: that our nature is such that it contradicts the nature of God. The fact that we do not fear God proves, therefore, not only that we do not know Him, but also that we are far away from Him.

The fear of Lord is a sign of spiritual vitality. Insensitivity in this respect, correspondingly, signals spiritual death. Fear of ordinary kind makes our hearts beat faster. Heart can beat fast for love as well. Absolute love for God is the heart, and fear of the Lord is heartbeat, of spirituality. Heartbeat facilitates blood circulation, which keeps the body alive and healthy. Blood carries nutrients, removes impurities and fights disease. Healthy fear of God, rooted in the love of God, is indispensable for our health and wholeness. Consider what the book of Proverbs says on the blessings that result from the fear of Lord.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom [Psalm 111:10; Proverb 1:7]

The fear of the Lord causes one to hate evil. [Proverbs 8:13; 16:6]

The fear of the Lord is fountain of the life [Proverbs 14:26-27]

The fear of the Lord leads to a satisfying life, and spares one from much evil. [Proverbs 10:23; 22:4]

Frontiers of the fear of God:

Children need to be brought up in the fear of the Lord; for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. [Ephesians 6:4] What this implies is that the fear of the Lord needs to be deemed the very foundation of wisdom. Laying the foundation marks the beginning. The personality of a child needs to be built on the foundation of the fear of the God. If this is not done, his life could be like a house built on sand. He will be vulnerable to the spirit of the age: the spirit of alienation and shallowness. The depth-relationship that underlies the healthy fear of God enables a child to avoid evil ways and to pursue long-term good. The fear of the Lord results from the knowledge of the Word. It is imperative; hence, that the Word be read and assimilated in Christian homes. The family culture as a whole needs to be steeped in, and guided by, the fear of the Lord. For a child, the fear of the Lord needs to be not just a concept, but a lived reality.

Parents have two options. Either they can bring up their children in the fear of the Lord, or, they can bring up their children in a way that would require them to live in fear of them. The Bible tells us why. Not to fear the Lord is to succumb, unawares, to idolatry. When Moses went to the mountaintop and was away from the people for forty days, the fear of the Lord began to dim and diminish in them. As a result, they began to crave for a counterfeit god. Losing the fear of God does not result in fearlessness. It results in a longing for alternate objects of fear. Apply this biblical insight to parenting. Parents who do not fear the Lord could turn their children into idols. This involves a double-disservice to the children. First, it encourages them, albeit unwittingly, to be rebellious. Rebelliousness breeds shallowness. Second, it prevents from honoring their parents. The duty to honor one's parents is turned into a Commandment because that is how a child makes a good beginning. Since life is a flow, for a child to make a good beginning is also to honor the beginning that God made with his parents. It is to learn from the experimental wisdom of one's parents. Children, who disdain to benefit from the experiences of parents, have to start from scratch. Much of their lives will be wasted in learning the basics of life, which could easily have been received from the parents. They go on reinventing the wheel. Consequently, only negligible progress is made in being wise and human.

The fear of the Lord, born out of deep love for Him, promotes personality formation. For want of it, a person becomes shallow, arrogant and complacent. [Proverb 3:7] He will tolerate, even love evil. [Proverb 8:13] Those who tolerate evil will become incapable, even intolerant, of good. The fear of the Lord not only prevents a person from wrongdoing, but also motivates him to walk in the way of the Lord. By protecting him from personal corruption and by safeguarding his inner purity, the fear of the Lord breeds a passion to do good. Holiness is not only the avoidance of evil; the active practice of God's justice is its essence. This, in turn, invests a person with character and stature.

The fear of the Lord fortifies us against despair and opens the door to a new beginning. But human life is not like a programmed machine. It is not the case, hence that those who fear the Lord shall never err. As human beings we remain vulnerable. Else, we may not have had to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil." But, in the event of something going wrong, we need not sink into despair. The empowering scope of the fear of the Lord comes to our help then. It enables us to repent and return to the way of life, as Peter did, in the wake of betraying his Master. He did not stay fallen, but got up and

resumed the journey of faith. Because Judas lacked the fear of God, he went and hanged himself. The loss of the fear of God breeds hard-heartedness. Hard-heartedness leads to despair; and despair births suicide. Suffering, no matter how acute, need not, by itself eventuate to suicide. Despair is a pre-condition for it. The fear of the Lord safeguards us from hard-heartedness and despair.

The fear of the Lord ensures that we practice justice in inter-personal relationships. The fear of the Lord makes us aware of, and respect, the worth and dignity of every person. We are to treat others the way we wish to be treated. All of us want to be treated justly. The fear of Lord ensures that we extend to others the justice we expect for ourselves. In the absence of it, relationships become manipulative and oppressive, smoldering with resentment life-long. No one who knows and fears the Lord can treat another human being as a victim, a tool or an instrument, which is a capital offense against the Kingdom.

The fear of the Lord ensures the wholeness of a society. The most reliable index to the moral health of a society is its commitment to justice. And the touchstone of a society's sense of justice is the availability of the justice to the poor and the powerless. In a corrupt society justice becomes the exclusive right of the rich and the mighty. The widows, orphans and aliens become justice priorities in the ambience of the fear of Lord.

The fear of the Lord is the secret of the spiritual beauty and integrity of the church. The church of Laodicea is an example of what happens to church life when this fire dies out. It becomes neither hot not cold; but lukewarm. The sinister implication of it is that Jesus has no place in the life of that church. He is kept out [Revelation 3:20]. Jesus is out, because worldliness is in. God and Mammon cannot co-exist. Such a church is an ugly thing in the sight of the Lord. Jesus spits it out; it is so distasteful.

Extreme spiritual darkness results when religious abandon the fear of the Lord. It was this, which infuriated Jesus most. For want of the fear of Lord, the temple of Jerusalem became a den of extortion, a market place of Mammon worship. This is the gravest threat that a religion suffers and it should not be compromised with. A religion can be corroded and crippled only from within. No religion succumbs to external threats and dangers. Before Caiaphaz and Pilate can get at Jesus, a Judas has to betray Him. When religious leaders forsake the fear of the Lord, they become catalysts for ungodliness. They become the ambassadors of spiritual anarchy.

Ironically, religious leaders are more vulnerable in this respect than laity. They handle sacred things routinely. Familiarity dims the awe of things holy, even if it does not breed contempt. So godly things become priestly accessories. The service of God becomes casual routine, which excludes the need to seek the Kingdom of God and His justice. Not to seek is to preside over and to perpetuate the status quo. The status quo is a responsibility of human interests. Religion could slip away slowly from the authority of God and become over-ridden by worldly interests. The only safeguard against this seminal degeneration is the fear of the Lord. Religion in the Kingdom of God is marked by the fear of the Lord. Fear of man corrupts religion in the kingdom of man. "Fear not," said Jesus to disciples, "those who can kill the body, but not the soul."

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