

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of know-ledge.” (Proverbs 1:7). “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” (Proverbs 9:10). What is this fear of which the Bible speaks? Some claim that fear is “reverence” or “respect” for God. Others defend a real fear or even a terror of God as the proper definition. As in all Bible study, the context is always the key to understanding the text. If we consider the context, we can grasp the meaning of the word “fear”.

First we need to know that our English word fear is used to translate several different words in both the Old and New Testaments. Not all of these words contribute to our understanding of fear. We have a Hebrew word which in some contexts is translated fear because one is whirling about in fear. We have another word meaning to tremble or shake with the idea of fear. The primary Old Testament word for fear is the Hebrew word *yare*.

What does *yare* emphasize? Is it basically reverential respect of God? When Isaac and Rebekah came into a foreign land, Isaac told a lie or at least a half-truth, because he feared the men (Genesis 26:7). This wasn't a reverential respect, Isaac feared they would kill him in order to take his beautiful wife.

When Pharaoh and his army pursued the sons of Israel to the shore of the Red Sea, the sons of Israel feared Pharaoh and his army (Exodus 14:10, 13). The sons of Israel did not have a noble or fearful respect for them. They feared that the army would kill them on the shore. But when Jehovah delivered them by leading them through upon dry land and drowning Pharaoh and his army in the sea, they feared Jehovah (v. 31). They now had seen a display of His power and had a fear of Him.

When God came down upon Mount Sinai to give the law to the sons of Israel, the people saw the thunder and shuddered (Exodus 20:18). They asked Moses to go before God on their behalf so they wouldn't die (v. 19). These people feared that they would die. They were not exhibiting reverential respect but real fear of dying. But they were told not to fear (v. 20). God wasn't there to kill them at that time. He was there to put His fear before their faces so that they wouldn't sin. Again, this was not to put a reverential respect before them. This was to show them how awful God could be if they did get out of line. This was legitimate fear. Remember that of the commandments, most required the death penalty for transgressing them. The last, “You shall not covet ...” (Deuteronomy 5:21) had no humanly enforceable penalty. But God intervened and killed some who engaged in this [went to lusting] on at least one occasion, demonstrating that what man couldn't know and do, God could (Numbers 11:4, 34).

How does that fit into the statements, the fear of Jehovah is the beginning of knowledge and of wisdom? What was Israel's wisdom? Their Law, if they would guard it and do it, would be their understanding and wisdom before the nations (Deuteronomy 4:6). Since this law was coming from God, it would be a powerful expression of wisdom before the nations. But having the Law was not sufficient. It was necessary to guard and do the Law. It was, therefore, necessary that Israel be motivated to do just that. The fear of Jehovah, what He could and would do, if they transgressed His law, motivated them to know the Law, guard the Law and do the Law. In this way, the fear was the beginning of knowledge and wisdom. By that fear, one would turn from evil, giving heed to the Law. (Proverbs 16:6). If one understood this fear, then he would welcome the wisdom from God's mouth, which was the Law itself (Proverbs 2:5-6). The result would be a discernment of righteousness and justice (v. 9). If one failed to guard and do the Law, his days would be cut short. He would die, either at God's hand or the hand of those who were doing the Law (cp Numbers 25:6-8). Therefore, the fear of the Lord would result in one living longer in the land (Proverbs 9:10-11).

That's Old Testament fear. That fear was fear of what could happen. It was fear of the power of God, which He could direct at the sons of Israel. It was fear that God could kill them because of disobedience to the Law. It was far more than reverential fear or respect. Is that the same kind of fear we find during this present dispensation of grace?

The word most translated fear in the New Testament is the Greek word *phobos*. *Deilia* is translated fear in 2 Timothy 2:7, "God has not given us a Spirit of fear." However, *deilia* is cowardice to act and not properly "fear". Our study will focus on the word *phobos*.

In the early years of the dispensation of Grace, when the Church was in infancy, she lived primarily under the rule of the Mosaic Law mixed with the Apostles' doctrine. Therefore, fear played a part in the behavior of these early church saints. When Ananias and Saphira died great fear came upon the whole Church (Acts 5:1-11). They learned that God wasn't messing around. He was serious about the relationships of people within this new assembly. This was not reverential respect. This was fear of dying. Ananias and Saphira had only lied. Many of us wouldn't consider that too serious. But God took it very seriously.

Some other examples of plain simple fear are found in the New Testament writings. When Paul later was saved and attempted to join the disciples, they feared Paul, knowing who he had been and what he had done (Acts 9:26). When Paul had little success and much opposition both at Mars Hill and then in Corinth, Paul ceased speaking and retreated to his lodging. But the Lord appeared to Paul and told him to stop fearing for He had many people in the city (Acts 18:9; cp 1 Corinthians 2:3).

This kind of fear can be and is experienced by believers. When a believer obstinately refuses to grow and treats the Spirit of grace with arrogance, refusing to leave dead religion and assemble with genuine believers, God deals with him. Under the Law, he would have been stoned by the testimony of two witnesses. But God can do more. God might leave him with the fearful expectation of judgment (Hebrews 10:27). God could also make him sick, cripple him or even bring about his death (1 Corinthians 11:30). Whatever God would do, a believer in such a position would express Paul's words, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of an angry God." (Hebrew 10:31).

Throughout the New Testament, when we encounter fear in the grace believer as illustrated in Hebrews 10:31, it always refers to believers who are immature or obstinately out of God's will. The Scriptures illustrate that God is longsuffering. But God is also a God of love, which means He desires what is best for those He loves. "Whom the Lord loves He child-trains and scourges every son whom He receives" (Hebrews 12:6). To desire the best for us, God must child-train us and even scourge us. God's first choice is for us to grow and to deal with us without fear. But when believers can't get along, fear is a motivator to get on track (cp Philippians 2:12; 2 Corinthians 5:11; 7:1). When a believer will not walk by faith and will not enter the rest God makes available to us there is fear that we might not enter that rest (Hebrews 4:1). [This rest is now not a future rest. Our future is secure] In fact when others conduct themselves in this manner and we attempt to pull them from the fire, we are to fear, unless we should be similarly effected (Jude 23).

But that is not the only way in which the Greek word *phobos* is used of the grace believer. We have not received the Spirit of slavery unto fear (Romans 8:15). God's will is not for us to operate by law but by the Spirit. Operating under law results in fear. Operating outside the Spirit's work results in fear. For the spiritual believer, this fear of punishment is not God's design.

In 1 John 4:17-18 we might find a contradiction regarding fear if this is the only definition we apply to this word, "A quality of fear is not in the love. But on the contrary the mature love

casts the fear outside, because the fear had punishment. Now the one fearing has not been matured by the love.” In this context, John has been encouraging these believers to love as God has loved us (4:11). The spiritually immature believers of these assemblies have been effected by false teachers, antichrists, people who deny that Jesus is God and that Christ ever came in flesh (2:22; 4:2). This is an intensely serious doctrinal deviation, dividing true believers from false ones. But it effected the spiritually immature in the sphere of their conduct. These teachers had communicated that sin was not an issue (1:7-10). Hand-in-hand with this was a lack of genuine love. John has been demonstrating the errors of this teaching. Love, which is part of the Fruit from the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) ought to govern their conduct with others. In fact the presence or absence of love is a good measuring stick for determining which believers were walking the walk versus those believers who were merely talking the talk (2:3-6).

As a result, genuine love was a good measure also of maturity. A lack of maturity resulted in fear or lack of boldness or confidence with respect to Christ’s presence in the Rapture (2:28; 4:17) as well as in our daily communication with the Father (3:21; 5:14). The believer is to love Christ’s appearing, which results in righteousness (2 Timothy 4:8). But if one is not loving other believers, fulfilling the new commandment, he would not be anticipating that appearing of our Savior. He lacks boldness and perhaps is even fearful of the Rapture. I recall as a young person, being out of God’s will and being terribly frightened that the Lord would come back and catch me.

Therefore John encourages these believers to walk in love (2:6) so that this love can be perfected (4:17). The word “perfected” means completed or coming to that end for which one was designed. “Perfected” in our English communicates ideas which do not exactly represent this word. In English, “mature” is more near the meaning. John instructs them that abiding in God and His love is the means by which the love is matured with the believer (v. 16b-17a). Mature love is love that is coming to be that which God designed it to be.

This mature love results in boldness in the day of judgment (v. 17). A believer who is not abiding in his position is not having love matured in him. A believer who is not having love matured in him is not likely to look forward to the Rapture or standing before Christ’s judgment of his own works of service. But there is no fear in the love (v. 17b). The mature love casts out fear for fear has punishment (v. 18a). In our position in Christ, in which the believer is to abide, God credits him [logically reckons to him] the works and merits of Christ accomplished in His human nature (cp Romans 6:3, 6, 10-11). God reckons this true of every grace believer regardless of whether he ever enjoys it or abides in it during this life. That’s called grace (Ephesians 1:6 - A.V. “accepted” is literally “graced”) All that God reckons true of the believer will become an absolute reality for every grace believer in the Rapture. Therefore, the believer who abides in his position is not only having this love matured in him, which is part of his experience, but is already enjoying that which will be true of him in the Rapture. He knows that there is no punishment in the future for the believer and therefore no fear. The immature or obstinate believer may lack this both in knowledge and certainly experience. The immature one abides in this world where punishment exists and mentally believes such a punishment will also exist at the Rapture. This is why fear is not always a legitimate motivation for the grace believer. If you are spiritual and growing this kind of fear is definitely not legitimate.

So what about such important passages as Ephesians 5:21 which indicate that the spiritual believer will submit to other believers in a quality of fear of Christ? We would classify this under a different quality or aspect of fear which is illustrated in this same chapter. In 5:33 we find that the wife who is filled by the Spirit is to fear her husband. What kind of fear would this be? Fear

of being killed, hurt or disciplined? No! But in the marriage relationship, as the husband filled by the Spirit, loves her and honors her (5:28-29, 33) the wife in turn submits to that love and fears the husband with a fear of disrupting this experience, this love and honor which he is presently showing her. It is a respectful fear of interrupting or doing anything to alter this love. It is not a fear of being hurt but of hurting another (cp 1 Peter 3:2, 6). This is the kind of fear the grace believer should have.

We will all stand before Christ's Bema. Knowing therefore the fear of the Lord, we persuade men (2 Corinthians 5:16). Paul feared that his actions and attitudes in service to the Lord would not be found to His praise but would be worthless. Paul attempted to communicate this to others. He persuaded them. In 2 Corinthians 5, he persuaded believers to stop knowing one another according to the flesh but to know them with the perspective of their being in the new creation (vv. 16-17). They needed to be reconciled to God (v. 20). A believer who relates to other believer in the flesh, is a believer who is not living reconciled to God. God has already reconciled us to Himself but, we need to live as though we are reconciled. In this Paul persuades men. He doesn't want to stand before the Lord having served while considering everyone in the flesh. Rather, He wanted to walk by faith, pleasing Him (v. 9). He feared the hurt he might cause to others and therefore to Christ. Remember, Christ is suffers with His body (cp Acts 9:4,5; Colossians 1:26).

It is also in this vein that Paul wrote the Philippians to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling (2:12). They are to work out their own salvation. They are not told to meddle in the salvation of others. You can not do this for anyone but yourself. The word "work out" means to render, work upon to produce something. Therefore, it doesn't mean here to produce your own salvation or work for your own salvation. It means to work upon your own salvation with the goal of producing something. The fruit a believer may manifest is produced by the Spirit. But the Spirit doesn't produce fruit in an idle or contrary believer. He produces fruit in the believer who is using his own salvation, or working upon it.

The believer is to do so with fear and trembling. As previously illustrated in Ephesians 5 with the wife, this is fear of disrupting this relationship with God. There is no fear of losing this relationship or of severing it, but of being displeasing to Him. It takes this salvation seriously. Why? Because God is the One working in the believer (v. 13). He causes the believer to desire [A.V. "will"] to do things in keeping with God's good pleasure. We have the Father's seed in us which constitutes our sharing in God's kind of nature (1 John 3:9; 2 Peter 1:4). This is the believer's new nature. The desires of that new nature originated with God. God is also the one operating or energizing in the believer. You see, God not only gives us the desire to please Him but the means of doing it, His kind of nature and power. That is both a great salvation and a salvation to be taken seriously. We shouldn't treat it lightly. We should work it out with fear and trembling. If God has both given us the desire and ability, why would we want to do anything, such as grumbling and complaining (v. 14) that would result in us being anything but blameless and harmless children of God (v. 15). God has given us such a great salvation, why would we want to be displeasing to Him in our service.

There is fear for the New Testament Grace believer. If we are obstinate to the will of God, then that fear may be very much like that kind of fear experienced by Israel in the Old Testament. But if we would abide in Him, have His love matured in us, we can have that kind of fear which is a respect but also a fear of hurting God. What kind of fear would you rather have?