

# The Fear of the Lord

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**F**EAR IS A PHENOMENON common to almost all religions. The pervasiveness of fear is seen in the fact that the Greeks of the ancient city of Sparta even dedicated a temple to the war god, Fear.<sup>1</sup> Fear in response to an encounter with a deity produced one of two reactions, either flight or an attempt to appease the hostility of the god through a sacrifice or other religious ritual.

The Greek philosopher, Epicurus, in a modern-sounding manner, denounced the role of fear in religion. Epicurus thought that fear gave rise to religion.<sup>2</sup> Because of his materialistic viewpoint of life, Epicurus thought that the gods were not involved in life. He reasoned that an emotion such as fear was irrational; man needed neither to flee from nor to appease the gods.

Despite the failure of people to relate to God as one to be feared, "the fear of the Lord" is a prominent

concept in the Bible. In the Old Testament the most common Hebrew word for fear is *yare* [yah-RAY], a term that denotes awe and reverence. In over 136 occurrences the *yare* word group describes people's relationship to God. In the New Testament the most common Greek word for fear is *phobos* [FOE-bose], a term whose basic usage denotes

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**Lesson reference:**

L&W: Ephesians 5:21;  
CUS: 2 Corinthians 5:11



alarm or fright.<sup>3</sup> References to the fear of the Lord in the New Testament are not as numerous as in the Old Testament, but the phrase still is an important theological concept. Throughout the Scriptures, fear does not denote a terror of God, but rather a reverential respect for Him.

Fear is the natural and proper response to the character and power of God. The holiness of God produces fear in people because of their unholiness and sin. Adam and Eve's awareness of their sinful condition caused them to be afraid of God and to try to hide (Gen. 3:8-10). Because of the holiness of God, Moses was afraid to look at the burning bush (Ex. 3:6). The Israelites responded with fear to the mighty power of God that was demonstrated at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:31). When the Israelites improperly moved the ark (2 Sam. 6:9), David feared God because he witnessed the execution of God's judgment.

Fear is not necessarily a negative emotion. Fear prompts people to be obedient; indeed, obedience is proof that one fears the Lord. After Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son in obedience to the command of the Lord, God said, "Now, I know that you fear God" (Gen. 22:12).<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy repeatedly associates fear and obedience (Deut. 5:29; 6:2, 24; 8:6; 10:12; 17:19; 31:13). The psalmist declared, "Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments" (Ps. 112:1, RSV). A common feature of ancient Hebrew poetry was parallel structure, where the second line defined or further characterized the first line. To delight in God's commandments certainly implied the keeping of them, and therefore, the psalmist equated obedience and fear.

The fear of the Lord not only is concerned with our relationship to God, but fear also influences our relationship with others. The fear of the

Lord is the ethical foundation of our relationships with people. In Leviticus, to fear the Lord means to treat the handicapped fairly (Lev. 19:14), not to withhold money owed someone (Lev. 19:13), not to wrong another in property transactions (Lev. 25:17), and not to take advantage of the poor (Lev. 25:36, 43). To withhold kindness means to abandon the fear of the Lord (Job 6:14).

To fear the Lord means to live in a tension between attraction and apprehension.<sup>5</sup> Because of God's power and holiness, a mysterious quality exists in His nature that inhibits familiarity. On the other hand, fear can generate an attraction, even friendship, with God. "The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him" (Ps. 25:14). Deuteronomy associates the fear and love of God in the same verse (Deut. 10:12).

Two New Testament writers associated fear with Jesus. In Ephesians 5:21 Paul instructed Christians to submit to one another in the fear of Christ. This verse is the only time the phrase "the fear of Christ" occurs in the New Testament. Mark repeatedly recorded that the disciples responded with fear to the power evidenced through Jesus' miracles. The disciples were fearful when Jesus stilled the storm (Mark 4:41), when He walked on water (6:49), and when He was transfigured (9:6). This fear of the disciples at Jesus' miracles corresponds to the fear produced by the mighty acts of God in the Old Testament. The women responded with fear when they discovered the empty tomb (Mark 16:8); they had encountered the truth that Jesus was victorious over death, the ultimate mighty act of God. Thus, in the New Testament, the fear that properly belongs to God alone is given to Jesus. The statements, therefore, associating fear and Jesus are an indirect evidence for the doctrine of the Trinity. In a manner similar to the Old Testa-



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ment, the New Testament relates ethics and fear.

One possible difference may be noted between the two testaments, however. While in the Old Testament fear is one of the foundation blocks of ethics, in the New Testament it appears to be a motivating force in ethics. Fear is a motivation for circumspect living because God is judge (1 Pet. 1:17).

Fear is a key element in the social sphere of ethics. Ephesians 5:21 is a transitional verse between the command to be filled with the Spirit (v. 18) and the instructions concerning relationships that follow. The evidence that we are filled with the Spirit is seen in our relationships. The basic principle of our social ethics is mutual submission in the fear of Christ. Mutual submission is the key principle between husband-wife, children-parents, and slave-masters.

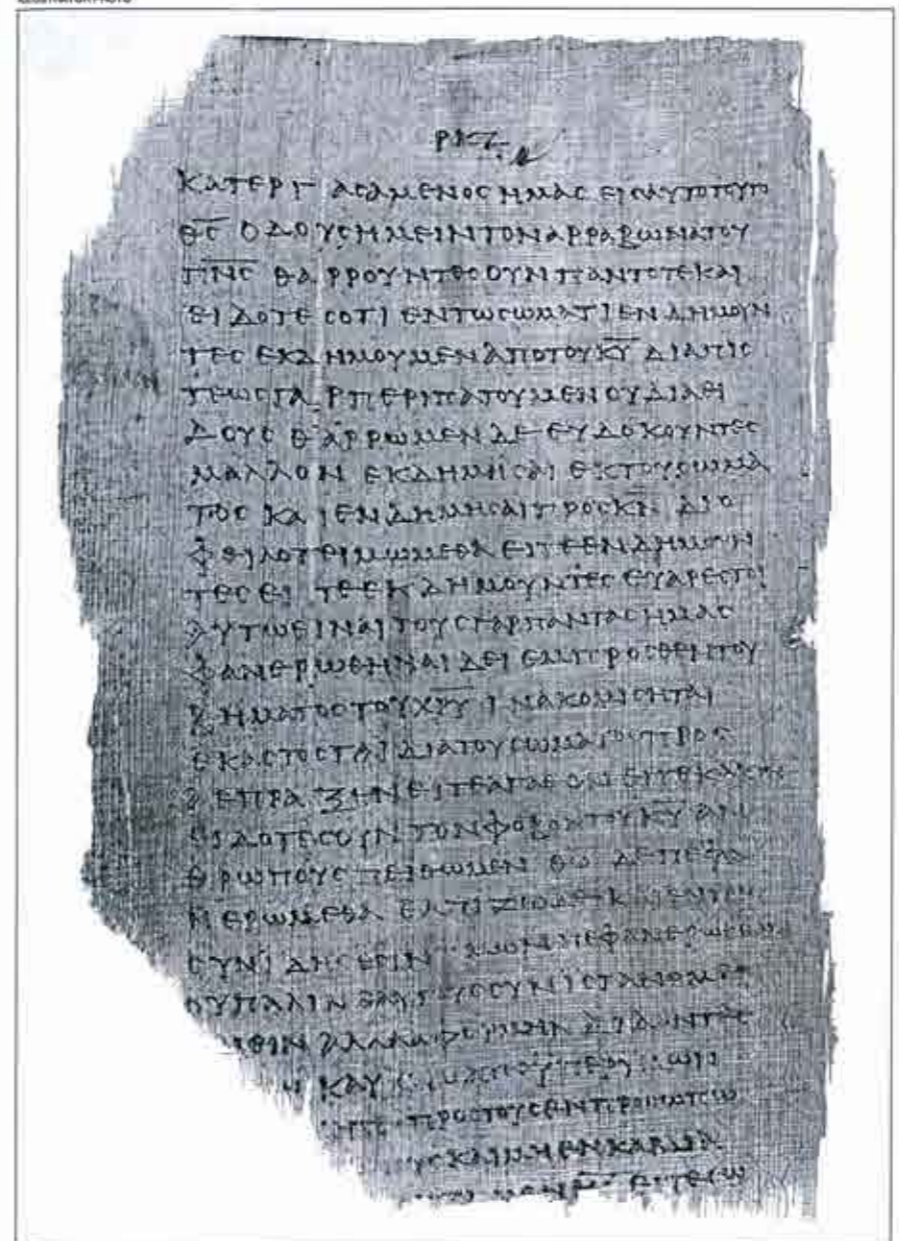
Fear also is a key element in our personal ethics or decisions concerning right or wrong. After affirming his

love toward the Corinthians and asserting his role as father, Paul warned them about associations with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:11-7:1). In 2 Corinthians 7:1 Paul exhorted the believers to cleanse themselves from every idolatrous defilement and to make

holiness perfect. To make holiness perfect is the positive correlative to the cleansing from defilement. The term translated "perfect" by the RSV may be translated "complete," "perform," "accomplish," or "bring about." To cleanse ourselves is, thus,

**Left:** Ares was the Greek god of the warlike spirit, not in the sense of sending troops into battle, but rather in the vein of strife and discontent. In the ancient Greek mythologies he always was fomenting strife, and thus, fear and dread. Ares was the son of Zeus and Hera, and by Aphrodite he was the father of Phobos and Deimos (Fear and Rout). His Roman equivalent was Mars. **Below:** Paul spoke of a different type of fear in 2 Corinthians 5:11, one that provided motivation because of his love for God. This copy of 2 Corinthians 5:5-13 is from the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, Ireland.

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to bring about holiness in the sphere of the fear of God. The verse also describes our relationship to God; we make progress in our relationship with Him by cleansing ourselves. Christians are to avoid any relationships or associations that hinder such progress.

Finally, fear motivated Paul in his ministry (2 Cor. 5:11). The major theme of 2 Corinthians is Paul's defense of his apostolic ministry. Paul needed to defend his service because the style of his ministry contrasted sharply with that exhibited by others (2 Cor. 4:7-12). Paul's ministry included suffering, but the suffering was temporary. God prepared a dwelling that does not compare with the suffering of this age (2 Cor. 4:17-5:10).

In 2 Corinthians 5:10, he noted that everyone, even Christians, must appear before the judgment seat. As a consequence of the coming judgment, Paul's ministry was conducted in the fear of the Lord. To Paul, fear was not a horror of standing before the Lord; indeed he looked forward to being in God's presence (2 Cor. 5:8). For him, fear promoted dependence on the Spirit and the continual respect of God as judge even after conversion. Because Paul one day would be judged, he persuaded people of the sincerity of his ministry.

Biblical fear is not a crippling hindrance in life. Fear is a healthy response to the character and nature of God. As such, fear is a motivator in Christian living and ethics, and proper values in ministry. ○

1. G. Wanke, "phobos," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 9:191.  
 2. R. H. Pfeiffer, "The Fear of God," *Israel Exploration Journal*, 5 (1955): 41.  
 3. Wanke, 208.  
 4. All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.  
 5. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., tr. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 2:269.

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