

The Fear Of God

Becoming Submissive

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 08-Feb-92; Sermon #005

We have been examining some of the subjects upon which, I feel, we must *refocus*. They have become blurred and indistinct through sermons filled with a psychological or, let us say, a "Protestant" bent to them.

The first sermon broached the question, "Do you see God?" We concluded that, unless we see God actively and intimately involved in our lives, we are not going to exercise very much faith.

The second message had to do with what the church is—it is a spiritual entity, though not contained in any one, single corporate unit.

Now this sermon, hopefully, fits right into the flow of the aforementioned messages. We may entitle it, "The Fear of God Revisited" or "A Fresh Look at the Fear of God." It is the result of some thinking I have been doing lately regarding what, I feel, has been the church's approach to the fear of God. I include myself here, and I feel that I have not been giving as complete a picture of the fear of God as I should have been giving.

We have, in effect, downplayed the fear of God and have actually been hiding its fuller meaning through the use of such euphemisms (or definitions I will call them) as respect, reverence, or awe. These words are, indeed, definitions of the word "fear," but are narrow enough that, I feel, their use has gradually caused us to create a nice, soft teddy-bear of a god against whom we can "snuggle up" whenever we are in trouble or discouraged. God, indeed, is a refuge for those who are discouraged and in trouble, but there is a great deal more to God than His being the comfortable personage upon whose lap we may climb.

We are familiar, I think, with Proverbs 1:7 where it says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. I looked into every modern translation I have available and the only one that has changed that word into something softer than "fear" is the Moffatt translation, which uses the word "reverence." Modern translators still choose to use "fear," which is a much harsher word than "reverence," because it carries with it connotations of fright. Is it possible that those connotations are intended by God to be part and parcel of our understanding and use of that word?

I think we need to begin to understand that our worship of a great, powerful, and holy

The Fear of God by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

God is not intended to be taken for granted. Fright, dread, and terror of Him are a vital aspect of all that is encompassed by the generic term "fear."

Have you ever wondered whether you have the fear of God? How can you know? Can it be measured? Can you trust your feelings?

I want us to consider this next scripture in terms of what the modern Protestant view of God is—the one in which He is very largely looked upon as being a nice, snuggly teddy-bear.

Hebrews 10:26-31 For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The Lord will judge His people." [Notice that, "The Lord will judge His people!"] It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

This is a *New Testament* picture of this "snuggly teddy-bear!" And it shows that God punishes those who are contemptuous of Him. I would put a pretty strong English word in there. Contemptuous means to disdain, despise, look down upon, to treat as negligible. What these verses are doing is emphasizing the fact that God will act.

God looks upon the heart and He sees right through all of the pretenses that we put up, all the facades that we put around us. And this series of verses, in a New Testament context, is warning us that the sinner should not regard the judgment of God lightly.

Admittedly, the apostle Paul is talking here about the *willful* sinner. He is not talking about those who occasionally sin as a result of weakness, but those who have actually become apostate. He did not hesitate to warn Christians about such backsliding in a letter and, apparently, felt that those to whom he was writing (part of a Christian congregation) were slipping in that direction. The scriptural context reveals that the sinner, by his conduct, shows his disregard for God. His actions indicate that the relationship, in his opinion, requires little or none of his attention.

The Fear of God by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

Remember that this is shown by his conduct and that it may not be something that he says, verbally, with his tongue—he does not say, "I am contemptuous of God. I think He is negligible." By his conduct, then, he actually assesses the sacrifice of Christ as being nothing more than an ordinary death!

What we must understand is that a person's conduct springs from an inner disposition. It is something that we have come to call "attitude." Or we may say that it is something that is in the heart, "Out of the heart the mouth speaks." But it is also from the heart that conduct springs. And so this contemptuous attitude is carried in the heart and not necessarily something that is uttered. It is revealed by the person's conduct. This person is a sinner regardless of what he is saying with his tongue because his conduct is revealing what is in his heart.

Verse 30 reads, "For we know Him..." Do we know Him? This is the question for us, today. Do we know Him enough to rightly fear Him?

Paul here focuses on the character of the judge. The judge is God. God would not be a righteous God if He allowed sinners to escape punishment for their contempt. And the warning is that, because God is a righteous God, He will punish His people. We are not talking about people in the world. We are talking about HIS people. The verse quotes from Deuteronomy which says, "The Lord will judge His people."

Paul indicates that, if we know Him, the quality of fearing to face Him in judgment will be very much a part of our thinking. We are being reminded that Christians bear more danger in this one respect than the unconverted because "to whom much is given much is required." Those judged under the Old Covenant (those referred to in verses 28-30) were not in danger of rejecting Christ. But we must take heed because God's grace has absolutely no meaning to us if there is not a fiery judgment from which we are to be saved. We must know, however, that we do have this grace and that there is, indeed, a fiery judgment that we need to fear.

In Matthew 10 we find Jesus instructing His representatives, those He is sending out—His disciples.

Matthew 10:27-28 "Whatever I tell you in the dark, [That is in private, in secret, in the instructions I give you where others are not listening in...] speak in the light; [That is openly...] and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops. "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [or in *gehenna*].

It is not unreasonable that we should fear God. This is Jesus Christ uttering this and He says that we are to fear Him who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell. The reason is because He is the only one who can revoke the judgment of *gehenna* fire. The wages of sin are death—in *gehenna* fire. And, if we are going to escape this punishment, then we can see that it is very closely tied-in to whether or not we actually fear God.

Why is that so? What does the fear of God have to do with escaping a judgment that would otherwise take us into the lake of fire?

There is some encouragement here in the series of verses in Matthew 10. It indicates that, if one really fears God, then there is no need to be fearful of others. Proverbs 29:25 very plainly tells us that, "The fear of man is a snare." This is something by which we do not want to be entrapped.

I think it obvious, in the context of Matthew 10 and beginning with verse 27, that He is talking about fear in the sense of *dread!* The reason that we are not to fear men is because the worst that they can do cannot even begin to match the worst that God can do! The basis for this is what God is: omnipotent, omniscient, and in Him are the issues of life and death!

Brethren, this is our calling. We have been chosen by Him. This is our only chance. We are an insignificant number and we are even more insignificant personally. And yet we have been given this calling by Him. The world population is somewhere in the vicinity of 5,200,000,000 people. And out of this total are a minuscule number of those who are truly converted and have been given the Spirit of God. This is not something that we want to pass up! The fear of God is crucial to our salvation!

We would think that the future certainty of our having to face God one-on-one would be enough to really put the fear of God into us. But does it? Let us look again at the book of Hebrews and its context. We are reading the same letter written to the same people about whom we just read in chapter 10.

Hebrews 12:18-19 For you [you Christians] have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, [I think you can understand, here, that he is talking about the time the children of Israel were at Mount Sinai—roughly three months after they were rescued from their slavery in Egypt] and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the

word should not be spoken to them anymore.

God, in person, came down on Mount Sinai. And I know we are familiar with, "When Israel Out of Egypt Went," the psalm that is in our hymnal. The lyrics describe how the hills "skipped to and fro." That must have been an awesome and terrifying earthquake which announced the presence of God! The top of the mountain was on fire with, perhaps, lava issuing forth like a volcano! An awesome sight, indeed! Anyone having gone through any magnitude of earthquake can begin to understand just a little bit of the fear that these people experienced as God came down on the mount. They had a face-to-face, as it were, confrontation with God, even though He was hidden by dark swirling and churning clouds. It says that no man can look on the face of God and live.

Hebrews 12:20-22 (For they could not endure what was commanded: "And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow." And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.") But you [brethren] have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels.

Can we not see that he is making a contrast here? He is showing that, in one way, our position is actually worse off than theirs was—simply because we have been given so much and the responsibility upon us is so great!

Hebrews 12:25-26 See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven, whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven."

Hebrews 12:28-29 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. [Notice how he separated the two. Reverence and godly fear are not exactly the same thing. Godly fear has in it an element of terror!] For our God is a consuming fire.

Are you afraid of the lake of fire? Are you afraid of the consequences of sin? The consuming fire IS the consequence of sin! We can see that whenever God chooses to

reveal Himself in ways that can be appreciated by the senses (by eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and the sense of touch) the occasion is so majestic and so awesome and so dreadful that people cannot endure it! And might I remind you that this did not seem to do Israel any good, either. The older generation of ancient Israel, all those who had experienced that about which we just read here, all perished in the wilderness. Symbolically they did not make it into the Kingdom of God—even though they experienced, through the senses, God actually being in their presence.

We are beginning to see that godly fear has a *spiritual element* to it. It has nothing to do with anything that a person can perceive with the eyes, ears, nose, or any of the other senses. And I think we can see, too, that there is an element of terror involved in this fear.

Fear, according to the dictionary, is an unpleasant and often strong emotion caused by the anticipation of, or the awareness of, danger. Its synonyms are dread, fright, alarm, panic, terror, or trepidation. But it can also imply awe, reverence, esteem, veneration, or respect.

Isaiah was given a vision of God. And, unlike the people that we just read about in Hebrews 12, he was a more godly man. He was a man very much like Moses in his relationship with God. Moses was frightened by the appearance of God—as was Isaiah.

Isaiah 6:2-5 Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" And the posts of the door [I imagine they were the doorposts of the temple.] were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

Isaiah, like Moses, became *unglued* in God's presence. I think we may conclude from just these two examples that we are better off the way things are. Facing God in person, face-to-face in His presence, should not be something we feel the need to experience. What we do have of the revelation of God is sufficient to produce the right mix of fear—if it is given half a chance.

Isaiah 8:11-12 For the Lord spoke thus to me with a strong hand, and instructed me that I should not walk in the way of this people, saying: "Do not

The Fear of God by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

say, 'A conspiracy,' concerning all that this people call a conspiracy, nor be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.

Notice the wording here. He is talking about "fear."

The historical background here was that Judah felt threatened by the presence of the Assyrian empire. They were sweeping down on all of the nations and conquering them. Judah was frightened by them. Now as the people of God, what should they have done? In deep respect, awe, and faith they should have cried out to God and asked for His protection. He is the Lord of heaven and earth. He governs it all. He could have stopped the Assyrians. But instead of doing that, the people conspired with other nations and said to them, in effect, "You be our protection. We will make alliances with you. We are afraid of the Assyrians, but if we join together in an alliance, we will have enough power to fend them off and we will be safe."

God looked upon that as a conspiracy against Him. He was their Lord. He was their God. He was their King. And He had the power to protect. And thus, the instruction to Isaiah, "Do not enter into that conspiracy with them."

Isaiah 8:12-13 "Do not say, 'A conspiracy,' concerning all that this people call a conspiracy, nor be afraid of their threats [the Assyrians' threats], nor be troubled. The Lord of hosts, Him you shall hallow; let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread.

Just in case we thought it was sufficient to stand only in reverence or awe or respect of Him, Isaiah added, "Let Him be your *dread!*" And He is asking, in effect, "Of whom are you more afraid, the Assyrians or Me?" Verse 14 is most interesting: *If we make Him our fear and our dread...*

Isaiah 8:14 He will be as a sanctuary, but a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, as a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

There is a very interesting comment in the *Interpreter's Bible Commentary* regarding this series of verses. They saw very clearly that what God was instructing Isaiah to do was to turn away from the bulk of the Israelites and turn his message to a tiny remnant of a people who were willing to be obedient and faithful in response to their God. He is telling

him to turn away from the main body and pay attention to that small group, the remnant that wants to be faithful to God. And He said, "I will become a snare to those who are turning away from Me and I will be a trap. They will stumble as a result of not having the fear of God and because they are faithless."

It is interesting that God does not seem the least bit worried that His people should have a dread of Him. Indeed, this dread, rather than being a hindrance to a proper relationship with Him, is clearly seen as producing a positive benefit. He becomes a sanctuary, a place of abode, and a place to which we can run for safety. He *is* a place of safety for those who are afraid of Him!

Let us continue to build this case for the fear of God and once again turn to the book of Hebrews where, we remember, we have, as the audience, a group of people who were sliding away in relation to God. They were neglectful, as we find in chapter 2. And when we reach chapter 4 Paul says...

Hebrews 4:1 Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, [In other words, the way was open into the Kingdom of God. It had not yet come. God is showing that salvation is still an option that we can choose. These people can choose!] Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, LET US FEAR lest any of you seem to have come short of it.

We are certainly familiar with the Greek word that is translated "fear." It is the word *phobia*. We have all heard of phobias. This can easily be translated, "Let us be SORE AFRAID!" The English-speaking people have attached other words to *phobia*. Hydrophobia means to have a fear of water. Claustrophobia means to have a fear of cramped, tight, or closed spaces. Agoraphobia means a fear of open places—things that are out and away from those things with which one is comfortable.

These last few verses present a paradox. We normally run away from the things which we fear, do we not? A person with hydrophobia will run from water. A person with claustrophobia does not want to be in enclosed places. A person with agoraphobia does not want to leave those places with which he is comfortable and go out into open areas. And so we have a tendency to run from those things which we fear. But this book is teaching us that we are to RUN TOWARD the One whom we should fear above all things!

Paul is exhorting his listeners to not be complacent about their calling and relationship with God. Failure to reach the Kingdom of God is life's *supreme disaster!* I do not think

that we would be complacent if we felt aware that we were about to lose our most valuable possessions. Would we not act because we were afraid to lose these things? This is exactly what is happening in the book of Hebrews. These people are being urged to *press on!* And from this we get a very interesting and helpful principle: *fear is a motive for strenuous effort.* Our fear motivates us to take action. It makes us REACT! How do we react? This is the key to understanding the fear of God.

Something remarkable is beginning to emerge because of what fear does to a person. It causes us to react. Sometimes we react to avoid something unpleasant—something we may fear to face or feel. Fear may motivate us to react in order to save our life, will it not? If we were in a jungle and we knew that we were in the lion's territory (the area in which he was very comfortable and we were, in a sense, out of our element) and it is dusk and we, perhaps, had seen or heard signs indicating this lion was nearby, do you not think that *every sense* in our body would be attuned to the slightest sound? Do you not think that you would be on edge and ready to react in order to save your life? You had better believe we would react in such a manner! Fear makes a person react! And we will react in proportion to the intensity of the fear. The greater the fear, the greater the effort that will be made during the reaction!

In the case with God, He wants us to react to Him in order to avoid something that is unpleasant and, at the same time, will both enrich and save our lives. And if we do not react, in fear, then because we have sinned and because of the holiness and justice of God, we will LOSE OUR LIFE!

God does not want us to merely fear Him. He wants us to *react* by taking Him, His Son, His purpose, and sin into consideration every day, all the time, and in all circumstances. We are supposed to *practice* this until His way becomes so ingrained and so habitual to us that it becomes written in our hearts—and we, then, LIVE it by nature!

Psalm 34:8-11 Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him! Oh, fear the Lord, you His saints! There is no want [no lack] to those who fear Him. The young lions lack and suffer hunger; but those who seek the Lord shall not lack any good thing. Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is *not* something that comes naturally. The fear of the Lord is something that must be *learned*. And indeed it must be learned because it is the essence of true religion. I used the word "essence" in last week's sermon. It is that which makes something what it is. It is the real nature of a thing. And the fear of the

Lord is the real nature of the religion, the way of life, of God.

It is in us to instinctively fear when we are little children. I think that we fear being left alone. We fear falling. We fear sudden noises. We fear the dark. We fear lightning and thunderstorms. There are a lot of things that we fear almost instinctively because our first reaction is always to protect the self. There is a great deal that comes naturally and I am not saying that all of those fears are wrong or negligible. I am only saying that kind of fear, in contrast to the fear of God, is that which causes us to move to preserve our lives and that is fine, but the fear of God does not come so naturally. It is something that has to be begun and it is something that we have to learn and grow in. It is not in man to instinctively fear God in the biblical sense.

How can one learn to fear God? I just thought that it might be good, in case you thought that it is not in man to instinctively fear God, to read through, on your own, one of the best chapters that we could possibly read in the entire Bible. And that is Romans 1, where Paul gives an overview of how men believe that there is a God, a Creator, but they have suppressed the *knowledge* of God. They did not, and do not, fear Him! And what is produced because of this lack of fear is recorded in the scriptures.

Again, how can we learn to fear God? In the book of Ecclesiastes we read about how there are specific times for this and that—a time to be born, a time to die; a time to kill, a time to heal; and so forth.

Ecclesiastes 3:9-11 What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.

Men search for these things and are aware that there is a God who is Creator, as Romans 1 so clearly shows. And we know from our own experiences that there are *multitudes* out there in the public who believe that God exists. But how many of those know the purpose that God is working out? The closest they have been able to come is that they believe people are going to go off to heaven when they die. That is not the purpose God is working out. It is so much more majestic and so much grander and more glorious than that. There is no comparison between the truth and that which man has concocted! People do not seem to understand the connection between God's purpose and what our lives are right now, either.

What are we supposed to DO with what we understand? They do not understand that God is on a character-building campaign (if I can put it that way). And that character-building campaign requires our cooperation with Him. And that is what Solomon and God suggest here, that no one can find out the work that God does from the beginning. Do you know why? It is because they do not fear Him! The fear of God is something that must be *given*; it is something that must be *instilled* within a person—and it must be instilled by God!

Ecclesiastes 3:12-15 I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God. I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him. That which is has already been, and what is to be has already been; and God requires an account of what is past.

This is why we should be able to fear; this is where it all begins for you and me. The fear is caused to be in us by virtue of the fact that God has given us the ability to recognize His *power* (which none can resist), His holiness and *justice* (which no one can satisfy), and His *wisdom* (which none can attain to). This is something that WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN!

It is not in the world! If it was in the world, they would know it, too! But the evidence remains that they do not know what it is that God is working out. We see that men have a form of godliness, but deny the power. God is not really a part of their lives even though they recognize that there is a Creator. They do not understand His wisdom and they do not understand His justice. All of these are evidenced in the doctrines of the churches out there.

We have what we have; and what we have is a fear that has been instilled within us as a result of the calling of God. This may come about as a result of the observation of God's creation. It may come about because of deducing that there is a purpose that is being worked out. But however it comes, there is a fear in the form of awareness, recognition, or apprehension which *compels* acceptance and submission. But we must *choose*.

There was a time when we did not have the mind which we now have. This is the work of God instilling within us the recognition of Him that the world does not yet have. And that recognition has compelled you and me to react the way in which we do. It is a gift of

God and it is part of His grace.

However, there is in all of us such a powerful drive to *stuff* this knowledge—hide it, neglect it, bury it, put it in the back of our minds, and deny it! It is part of human nature to do such a thing. We have a tendency to neglect it. We have a tendency to bury it by busying ourselves with activities that are vain. We tend to be lazy about it. And this brings us right back to Hebrews 10:30-31. What I have just described are all forms of contemptuousness toward God, but God is going to judge His people!

When this process begins none of us may be able to give reasons as to why we are doing what we are doing until much later on. But that "strong hand" (about which we just read in Isaiah 8 and that constrained Isaiah to react in the way that he did and not go along with the people who were talking conspiracy against God, but to turn to those who were faithful to God) compels us to begin to react to God in the way that we do and has brought us to the point we are at right now.

Initially, we may not have been able to explain why the Sabbath began to mean something to us; why tithing began to mean something to us; why a relationship with God, much closer than anything we had ever had in the past, began to move us and make us do things we never before did; why we began to pray with a seriousness that we never before had; and why the commandments meant something to us that they never before had. But as we grew in the knowledge of all these precious gifts, there was *instilled* in us a FEAR!

Did not the first movement, or reaction, contain an element of saving ourselves from the lake of fire? Yes it did! There was an element of saving our own skin! And, in moving to save our own skin, to where did we turn? Was it not to the very One who was instilling this fear in us? He began to be a place of sanctuary and safety for us in order that we would, indeed, escape that lake of fire! The fear of God caused us to begin to react—and react in the right way. Though our faith may have been weak, gradually, because of this fear, we were moved to make the choices that were in accordance with God's will. These are choices we would have never made unless we feared Him.

The book of Proverbs is, first and foremost, a book of wisdom—one which teaches us to discern between wise and foolish (good and bad) choices. And here in Proverbs 1 we see that God is depicted as wisdom personified. There is a woman (wisdom/God) who is calling out to mankind and saying, in effect, that there is a natural wisdom, a truth out there which, if people would only recognize and use what we might call "common sense," they would be able to avoid many of the hardships of life into which they fall as a result of sin.

Proverbs 1:20-21 Wisdom calls aloud outside; she raises her voice in the open squares. She cries out in the chief concourses; at the openings of the gates in the city she speaks her words. [It is everywhere—if we would only pay attention or just take the instruction that is out there]

Proverbs 1:24-27 Because I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded, because you disdained [you neglected; you were contemptuous of] all my counsel, and would have none of my rebuke, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your terror comes, when your terror comes like a storm. [Why does this happen?]

Proverbs 1:29-30 Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord. They would [have] none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof.

Fearing God is a choice. We are faced with so many pressures, forces, and influences each and every day of our lives which compel us to react. And then we must make a choice: "Shall I go this way or shall I go that way?" One way represents the fear of God; the other way represents the fear of men, the fear of the loss of pleasure, the fear of the loss of some other physical, social, or cultural "need" that we do not want to lose.

Look at the verbs used in this series of verses: *hated*; *did not choose*; *would have none*; *DESPISED!* Is it any wonder that Romans 8 says that the carnal mind is enmity against God? We begin now to understand that it was the fear of God, given as the gift of God, which drove us to react and drove us in the direction of the very One who holds the issues of life in His hands! God instilled that reaction within us!

We see that there is an antagonism toward wisdom—toward God. It is not hiding, as we are shown. The people have access to what is common wisdom and it is described as being right out there on the street—out there in the public. It is in the forest; it is in the city; it is on the job—IT IS EVERYWHERE! We are surrounded by it! This is why God can make the accusation He does (in Romans 2) that the Gentiles who do not have the law are a law unto themselves when they understand that they shall not kill. Their own conscious bears them witness that they *understand* what is right and what is wrong!

It shows in Proverbs 1 that God (or wisdom) uses just about every device to awaken people to what is right so that they will fear evil. And we see her threatening, laughing, and warning, sort of like a dog baring its teeth. If a snarling pit bull braced to attack every time we were about to sin, we would fear then, would we not? Our skin would

The Fear of God by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

crawl; our hair would stand on end and we would be almost spit-less!

God has not chosen to warn us in that way, but He does warn us through His Word. And He also warns us through the fruit of sin—which we see in this world and also in our own lives. It is almost as if wisdom is saying here in Proverbs 1, "I told you so, but you would not listen!"

Psalm 119:79 Let those who fear You turn to me, those who know Your testimonies.

Turn to whom? Turn to the psalmist; turn to the teacher. Why? So that they can have a more perfect knowledge of what is right and what is wrong.

Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Proverbs 9:10 "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

The same word translated as "fear" in these two verses is rendered as "dread" in Deuteronomy 1:29; "terror" in Jonah 1:10; and "awe" in I Kings 3:28, and "reverence" in Leviticus 19:3. All of these factors are part-and-parcel to the context of Proverbs 1:7 and Proverbs 9:10. With God as the object of this fear we have contained therein elements of both shrinking back AND drawing close. This is not a dread that paralyzes a person's actions, but neither is it a polite reverence. Both characteristics are included.

Chapter 1 and verse 7 can be considered the motto of the entire book of Proverbs—and it ought to be the guiding principle of our lives. It reveals to us that the fear of God is fundamental to life. "Do you want wisdom; do you want knowledge? Then you had better fear God!"

Does this refer to any kind of knowledge or any kind of wisdom? The answer to that is NO! Man is fully capable, on his own, of accumulating a great deal of knowledge, but it is not the knowledge having to do with salvation; it is not the knowledge that has to do with moral, ethical, or spiritual education in which the quality of life is addressed. One can be very intelligent and discover a great deal of the knowledge of God (I am not talking about spiritual knowledge; I am talking about physical knowledge.) and all we have to do is look at this world around us. I am able to speak to this congregation, one

which is spread throughout the entire country, because of technological knowledge that men were able to dig from the laws of God. That is not the kind of knowledge that is being talked about here in the book of Proverbs.

He is talking about the knowledge that leads to eternal life. He is talking about the understanding and the wisdom that leads to eternal life. The fear of God is fundamental to that kind of knowledge. We might put it this way, "The fear of the Lord is a prerequisite of true knowledge." Indeed, the word "beginning" also means "the chief part." Put that in and we have, "The fear of the Lord is the *chief part* of knowledge." That is very interesting, indeed!

What does this mean in practical application? It means taking God into account. That which leads to a right, or saving knowledge that will produce the right relationship with God and other people is the fear of God. That will produce the right knowledge.

Many people do not actively despise God. They do, however, comport themselves as though He did not exist. If we were to ask them whether or not they were contemptuous of God, they would, in all sincerity and from their heart, say, "Absolutely not! I go to church and I believe that God exists!" But their knowledge of God does not lead them to put God first and take Him into account in every facet of their lives. It just does not happen. They do not really have the fear of God.

Let me repeat. This may seem redundant, but God is the Creator of the universe and of life and it is, consequently, impossible to obtain an understanding of our place in God's design without fearing Him. It is a simple, yet profound, fact of life that if we do not fear Him we are not going to come to know the right knowledge.

I think that it is essential to understand the way in which Proverbs looks at, or uses, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. Though they are specifically different, they are seen as virtually the same godly principle, but as part of a mix that produces a product. And that product is a life lived that pleases God.

They are the separate ingredients that make up, let us say, a vegetable soup or concrete. The fear of the Lord equates to the water (the Holy Spirit). Without the water, the soup is not really soup and the concrete is not really concrete. With the water, a more nourishing and strengthening food is produced than the individual ingredients have by themselves. And, too, with the water, a concrete substance is produced that is as hard and solid as a rock. They all go together and the ingredient that makes it work (that makes knowledge, wisdom, and understanding work) is the fear of God.

The Fear of God by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

Men are fully capable of discovering a great deal of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, but if they do not have the fear of God, where will it lead and what will it produce? It will produce exactly what we have—the world in which we live! Is this a *good* world—even though we possess such vast and incredible knowledge?

It is not a good world! It is filled with violence and war, upset families and children who are not being reared properly! Is this not a world filled with famine and disease epidemics (like AIDS), adultery, and fornication?

Man's knowledge, lacking this vital, missing dimension, has produced the world out of which we have come. It is the fear of the Lord that makes knowledge right and true. We will not have the WORLD TOMORROW until this missing ingredient is, once again, added to the mix as the essential component of a worldwide way of life! It is the ingredient that will, at last, make things work!

If one divorces himself from the fear of God, then knowledge becomes nothing more than an instrument of destruction. Think about this. When Adam and Eve sinned, they did it because they did not fear God. They knew God existed. He had just talked to them. The fact of His existence did not stop them from sinning. What is it that caused them to sin? It tells us right in Genesis 3. Satan told them, "You shall not surely die!" He removed from them the fear of the consequences of sin. He removed from them the fear of God! But God is able to destroy in hellfire. It was the lack of the fear of God that produced their death. Not only did they not consider the end result of their actions on a personal level, (They became convinced that they did not have to worry about dying and so they came to believe, instead, that they were immortal.) they also did not take into account all of the pain, trauma, and anxiety they were going to unleash on all of mankind by choosing to go contrary to the will of God!

Mr. Armstrong used to say that knowledge is information and facts. Understanding is the comprehension or insight into the proper application of facts and information. Wisdom is the right application (the actual USE) of the facts and understanding. This is exactly how the book of Proverbs uses these terms. Proverbs uses wisdom, not as an abstract, philosophical concept (or speculation, I might say), but as an understanding and right application of the principles which control morals and ethics. Wisdom IS ethical and moral.

Why did the psalmist (as we just read in Psalm 119:79 and also in Psalm 34:11) want those who feared God to turn to him? Because he wanted those who did fear God to learn to fear Him even more! Wise living, godly living does not remove fear entirely, but consists of fearing the right things. Adam and Eve feared the wrong things.

Most people do not know that, during the Middle Ages, church bells were rung because people feared there were demons in the clouds and that the ringing of the bells supposedly drove them out. We may smile at that, but back then this was what people feared. Perhaps we "moderns" have gotten over that little historical fact, or may consider it a lost piece of trivia. If we were to ask people today who attend Protestant and Catholic churches why they ring church bells, they would have no idea. Unbeknownst to many of them, the tradition dates back to the time that people feared demons inhabited in the clouds.

When you think about it, we fear things today that people back then did not fear at all. We fear viruses and bacteria. They did not know that such things even existed. We fear losing our jobs and being dependent in old age. We fear failure and losing social position. We fear being poor. Do you realize that it is the fear of God that puts all of these things in their right perspective? This is because the fear of God leads to knowledge, wisdom, and understanding which, in turn, gives us the right approach toward, and proper perspective of, that which we should rightly fear—and we can obviously see that we should fear God!

Proverbs 31:30 Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, [What can really be trusted?] but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.

When God describes the ideal woman, she is portrayed as one who fears God. In order to be deserving of this praise, she must possess this particular characteristic—and a lot of it! We are, also, going to have to assume that "what is good for the goose is good for the gander." God is no respecter of persons and, if a woman is to be praised by God because she has the fear of God, then a man is going to be praised by God because he, too, fears God.

Now here comes a Bible definition; we all have our Bible definitions: I John 3:4—sin is the transgression of the law; John 17:3—eternal life is to know God. Now for the Bible definition of the fear of the Lord:

Proverbs 8:13 The fear of the Lord is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate.

That is what the fear of the Lord is—to hate evil, pride, arrogance, and the evil way. That is why the woman pleases God and receives that praise. The knowledge of God, which is instilled as a gift, compels, or constrains one to depart from evil. In other words,

it leads one to keep the commandments of God.

The person makes the choice to do what is right and good and, thereby, evidences his inward disposition, his inward attitude, and proves what is in his heart by what we see on the outside—his conduct. He departs from evil. God is taken into account in his life and in every circumstance, in every aspect, and in every situation God is thought of and the choice is made to do it God's way. The person learns to HATE evil and to love to do what is right and good and pleasing to God! Godly living IS the fear of the Lord!

The obverse of the coin is true, too. If the fear of God is to hate evil, then the fear of God is also to live a godly way of life. The fear of the Lord is filled with moral content.

In Proverbs 8 it is, again, wisdom who is speaking (verse 1):

Proverbs 8:1 Does not wisdom cry out, and understanding lift up her voice?

If one truly fears God, then God becomes a place of refuge. And even though there is, indeed, a measure of fear there, a shift begins to occur in our reaction to it. We begin to run *from* that which we would like to do (carnally and naturally/evil and sin) as if it were a rattlesnake and we, then, run *toward* God!

With this understanding we may be able to now measure how much (or how little) we fear God. Do we run from sin, or run into sin? Do we play with sin and dawdle over it—thereby tempting God with it? Can we see that this is something that does not come naturally, that it is something that has to be given and something that has to be learned?

We began in Hebrews 10 and 12 where Paul explained the things that took place at Mount Sinai. Now here we are, in Exodus 20, right at the Mount. Notice the context, which we will pick up right after God gave the Ten Commandments, the law that defines what is evil and what is good.

Exodus 20:18-20 Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die." And Moses said to the people, "Do not fear; for God has come to test you and that His fear may be before you... [Why?] so that you may not sin."

That is why God is so concerned about us fearing Him—if we fear Him we will depart from sin. Brethren, fearing God is an essential element of godly character. Developing this vital attribute will bring about abundant blessings in our lives. It is a part of the very process of salvation because we must choose to fear God in the face of all the carnal fears there are before us. And we find in I John 4 about how to cast out fear.

I John 4:18 ...love casts out fear...

But even this love does not cast out ALL fear. There is a fear that we *should* have. We should fear electricity; we should fear tempting God. There are things of which we should still be afraid. God is not concerned about these, but He is concerned that we not lose our fear of the lake of fire. We must not lose our concern or understanding that in Him are the issues of life—and that God alone can revoke the penalty of sin, which is death in that lake of fire.

So we have found that godly fear is a choice; it is morality; and it is departure from evil. If we do not fear God we will not be humble. And, if we are not humble, we will not submit to His way. The fear of the Lord expresses itself in *submission* to His way and submission to His way is the substance of true religion—without which one will not have clear direction and purpose for one's life. The issues of ethics and morality, therefore, will become blurred and vague. So the fear of the Lord IS the foundation of true knowledge, of understanding, and of wisdom.