

The Fear of the God

The Passover—which Jews call the Pesach—was instituted by the Lord some 3600 years ago and has been celebrated by the Jews every year since. It is one of the high holy days of the Jewish calendar and it commemorates God's deliverance of the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt. As you recall, after Pharaoh refused to obey God's command to set His people free so that they could worship Him in their own land, God sent down plagues upon Egypt—ten in all. With each plague, Pharaoh's heart grew harder as he stubbornly set his mind against releasing the Israelites. But with the tenth and most horrible plague—the death of all the firstborn sons of Egypt—Pharaoh was humbled and he agreed to let God's people go. In chapter 12 of the *Book Of Exodus*, God, speaking through Moses, gave the Israelites specific instructions about how they were to escape the plague. They were to slaughter a lamb, take some of its blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of their houses, so that when God passed through Egypt he would pass over the houses of the Israelites and spare the lives of their firstborn sons. In the tenth plague we see the ferocity of God's wrath against those who defy him, and in the Passover we see God's love and mercy toward those who fear Him. Ironically, it is those who do not fear God—like Pharaoh—who have the most to fear from Him, and those who do fear God who have the least to fear from Him.

And that brings us to the subject of this evening's message: The Fear of God.

There is perhaps no other aspect of our relationship with god that puzzles us more than this one does. We love God and we feel grateful to him for all he has done for us. We are sorry for our sins, we repent of them and we want to turn away from them. We know how to praise God and worship him. But we don't really know how to fear him. We ask: how can you love and fear someone at the same time? For that matter, why would you fear someone who has shown you so much love? Since we have trouble dealing with the idea of fearing God we struggle to find other words to substitute for the word "fear"—words that mitigate its harshness and give it a kinder, gentler tone. Words like "respect" or "honor" or "regard with awe." "All commendable attitudes, but they stop far short of "fear."

Isaiah didn't say, "There is no respect for god in their eyes," he said, "there is any **fear** of God in their eyes." And the Psalmist didn't write, "Respect for God is the beginning of wisdom"; he wrote, "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." In ancient Hebrew—the original language of the Old Testament—the word translated as "fear" is "yirah", which meant "terror" or "dread." The "fear of the Lord" is "Yirat Yahweh." In Koine Greek, the original language of the new testament, the word which is translated "fear" is *ΦΟΒΟΣ* from which we get the word "phobia," and *ΦΟΒΟΣ* meant "fear" or "terror"—not "respect" or "awe." So any way you cut it, "fear" means "fear." The problem is that in our way of thinking, fear is a completely negative thing. No one chooses to feel fear: how can there be any good in fearing something or someone? In this area, believers and unbelievers are of the same mind: neither of us has any fear of God. We know other kinds of fear: fear of being in front of a group of people, fear of dark alleys, fear of snakes, fear of the IRS, fear of growing old, fear of death. There are even kinds of fear that are recognized as psychiatric disorders: acrophobia—fear of heights; hydrophobia—fear of water; claustrophobia—fear of confined places. There is even poganophobia which is the fear of beards. There are all these types of fear, but there is no fear of God. Why? Because God is invisible and seemingly silent about our wickedness. After listing the horrible sins of the Israelites, God asks, "...why have you not pondered this in your hearts? Is it not because I have long been silent that you do not fear

me?" Moses feared God: when God descended on Mount Sinai in fire and made the earth shake, Moses said, "I tremble with fear." Jesus said, "...I will show you whom you should fear: fear him who after the killing of the body has power to throw you into hell." So it is good to fear God and if we will allow him to, he will teach us how. If we pray to the Holy Spirit to create in us a proper fear of God, he will do it.

Now the fear of the Lord begins when we come to understand that he has wrath over sin. Paul writes in romans: "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, **so that men are without excuse.**" If a man refuses to believe in God, he does so against the evidence of his senses and the use of reason. To deny the existence of God compels one to believe that the universe created itself. And this obviously absurd. The truth is that people **prefer** to believe that there is no God so that they can do anything they want without being held to account. According to Paul, they are, "...storing up wrath against themselves for the day of God's wrath." And God's wrath is, "a consuming fire." But, you say, we have God's mercy through the grace he has extended to us in Jesus Christ. Why do we need to have any fear of God? There are four reasons: first and foremost, fear him for your own sake; When Isaiah had a vision of the thrice-holy God in the temple, he responded with trembling: "woe is me for I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips..." We too dwell in the midst of people of unclean lips who do not fear God. If you doubt that, just turn on your TV for a few hours. And whether we like it or not, the world has its way with us: most of us are people of unclean lips. So its right for Christians who struggle daily with their sins to fear what disciplines our heavenly father might bring upon them to help them abandon them. This is why Paul wrote, "Therefore work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." We should fear God for our own sake.

Second, fear God on behalf of those who do not fear him. We who have been blessed with saving faith have been given eyes which discern spiritual realities to which the faithless are blind. One of these spiritual realities is the existence of hell to which our unsaved relatives, neighbors, co-workers and friends are heading. Since there is no fear of god in their eyes, we must fear on their behalf, having our hearts wrenched with anguish over their destiny and letting that anguish move us to plead with them with great urgency. Paul wrote, "we are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though god were making his appeal through us." We **are** our brother's keeper.

Third, let the fear of God drive away your fear of people. Since there is no fear of god animating most of the people in our increasingly secular culture, it is becoming more and more aggressive in showing its anger and contempt for biblical Christianity. Recently the New York Times printed an op-ed column entitled: "The Road To The Coronavirus Hell Was Paved By Evangelicals." Atheists and secular humanists are every bit as committed to their religion as were the citizens of Ephesus who screamed, "great is [our pagan goddess] Artemis" for two solid hours. If we do not fear God, we will let the fear of humans cow us into shameful silence. But Christ said, "If anyone is ashamed of me, I will be ashamed of him in the presence of my Father."

Finally, let your fear of God move you to seek and save the lost. We need to minister the gospel of Jesus Christ to unbelievers as their only hope for deliverance from eternal death. We need to tell them the good news of a heaven which is free from all death, mourning, crying and pain. When this virus finally dissipates, it will be a good time to do that very thing, for God can use the fear of sickness and death to open people's minds to the gospel. We need to summon the courage to speak the truth to people—even when they would rather not hear it.

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God calls for people who will “rebuild the wall and stand in the breach for his guilty nation.” The prospect of “standing in the breach in the wall” to defend God's truth against all comers is scary. But if we have a healthy fear of the Lord and of the wrath he will visit upon all those who “suppress the truth out of wickedness,” it will give us the courage to man the wall. Make no mistake, there is a day of wrath coming which will make our current problem seem like child's play. But as God showed the ancient Israelites his love and mercy by saving them through the blood of a lamb, so now he shows us his love and mercy by saving us through the blood of the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—even Jesus Christ.

Amen.