

THE THEME OF “FEARING THE LORD”

What jumps out at me from this Psalm 34 is verse 11, where it says, *“Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.”* . And for me this is the key to understanding the whole of the psalm. David is teaching those who will listen, what it is to fear the Lord God. And by extension, God Himself is wanting to teach His children what it means to fear Him.

I have discovered that there are more mentions of fearing the Lord in this psalm than found in any other of the 150 psalms. This too leads me to believe that learning what it is to fear the Lord is the key theme of this psalm, and worthy of our close attention.

But what exactly does “fearing the Lord” mean? I remember being taught that it is basically “reverential awe” of God – that He is all-knowing, all-powerful and that to fear Him is to honor and worship His greatness, as compared to our smallness. But it has always seemed to me that it must mean more, because typically, “fearing” implies some kind of “being afraid of.” And yet we’re not supposed to be afraid of God – or are we? Listen to Jesus teaching his disciples:

Luke 12:4-5 *I say to you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!*

This sure comes across to me as more of a “being afraid of God” than as just a “reverential awe” of God. And in the stories of Moses and the Israelites, their fear of God was a “shaking in their boots” kind of fear to hold them in line. Right after Moses was given the Ten Commandments of God on Mount Sinai we read this:

Exodus 20:18 *All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.” Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.”*

From these Scriptures we learn that the fear of the Lord is not being afraid of God as a scary being (“do not be afraid”), but as a fierce defender of His holiness and the purity of His followers (“so that you may not sin.”) A good analogy is that we are not afraid of a policeman because he is a scary person, but because he has the authority to give us a ticket or arrest us for a crime committed. Likewise, our parents were hopefully loving to us when we were children, but we were nonetheless aware that they had the authority and responsibility to punish us for wrongdoing, giving us a strong, fearful motivation to obey.

Therefore, we conclude that “fearing the Lord” is more than merely having a reverential awe of God’s awesome majesty. It is also a fearful awareness of His divine authority as judge, knowing that there will be consequences both in this life and the next for our unholy behavior.

KEY SCRIPTURES ON “FEARING THE LORD”

Before we launch into what Psalm 34 teaches us about fearing the Lord, it will be helpful to hear the primary Scriptural teaching on this subject – mostly found in the poetic books of Job, Psalms and Proverbs. These will give us a proper framework for our full understanding.

Proverbs 1:7a The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

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

Psalm 25:14 The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He will make them know His covenant.

Psalm 33:18 Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him, on those who hope for His lovingkindness.

Psalm 111:10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments ...

Job 28:28 And to man He said, "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.

IN ESSENCE, FEAR OF THE LORD IS ...

- ... The foundation of all knowledge and wisdom
- ... Experiential knowledge of the Holy One
- ... Learning the secret of God's covenant of grace with mankind
- ... Doing His commandments in obedience
- ... Departing from all evil behavior

Now that we have a good Biblical foundation for what "fear of the Lord" is theologically, here is Psalm 34 where we are taught what "fear of the Lord" is practically.

Psalm 34 *A Psalm of David when he feigned madness before Abimelech, who drove him away and he departed.*

1. I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth.
2. My soul will make its boast in the Lord; the humble will hear it and rejoice.
3. O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together.
4. I sought the Lord, and He answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.
5. They looked to Him and were radiant, and their faces will never be ashamed.
6. This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.
7. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them.
8. O taste and see that the Lord is good; how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!
9. O fear the Lord, you His saints; for to those who fear Him there is no want.
10. The young lions do lack and suffer hunger; but they who seek the Lord shall not be in want of any good thing.
11. **Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.**
12. Who is the man who desires life and loves length of days that he might see good?
13. Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.
14. Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.
15. The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous and His ears are open to their cry.
16. The face of the Lord is against evildoers, to cut off the memory of them from the earth.
17. The righteous cry, and the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.
18. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.
19. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.
20. He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken.
21. Evil shall slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.
22. The Lord redeems the soul of His servants, and none of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned.

THE STORY BEHIND THE PSALM

We see that this psalm begins with the inscription that this song of David was written after he had fled to Abimelech (probably a Philistine title; Achish was the leader's name, as told in 1

Samuel 22:10-22:1). We assume David saw the error of his choice and experienced great fear that harm, not safety, would befall him, and decided to pretend to be insane. He *“scribbled on the doors of the gate and let his saliva run down into his beard.”* (1 Samuel 21:13)

Achish angrily sent David away in safety, and *“David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam; and when his brothers and all his father’s household heard of it, they went down there to him.”* (1 Samuel 22:1) And 400 men joined him and his family in what must have been a massive cave. (David’s “mighty men.”) We assume this psalm/song was written and performed for this large crowd, teaching them all what it was to fear the Lord, and how God had delivered David from all his fears in escaping from Achish.

THE OUTLINE OF THE PSALM

√ I see verses 10 and 11 as the “chorus” or key to the psalm. David and God say, I want to teach you practically what it is to fear the Lord. If you want a full and good life, learn this well.

√ I see the three first paragraphs as the “verses” or key points

Verse 1-3: BLESS THE LORD

Verse 4-7: SEEK THE LORD

Verse 8-10 TASTE THE LORD

√ I see the final two paragraphs, at v.15 and 19, as describing the benefits of fearing the Lord

THE TEACHING OF THE PSALM

The triumph and joy of this song is so clear that it is easy to forget the life context of the psalm.

“It is for people who find themselves at the absolute low point in life, which is where David was. Or find themselves between a rock, which in this case was King Saul, and a hard place, which was King Achish. It is for you when everything seems against you.” James Boice

1. We are taught that to “fear the Lord” is to **BLESS** the Lord, in verse one. This blessing and praise of the Lord is to be continual – *“at all times”* and *“continually be in my mouth.”* This last phrase emphasizes that blessing and praise of God should be verbal whenever possible, and not just thought or prayed. To BLESS the Lord is also to make our BOAST in Him, causing all those humble in heart (God’s Church) to rejoice in such a boast. And furthermore, to BLESS the Lord is to MAGNIFY Him – that is, show Him to be larger than life and greater than might first be thought. These first three verses teach us that to fear the Lord is to indeed have a reverential awe of God that is both thought, believed and verbally expressed in the fellowship of others (*“exalt His name together”*).

2. Secondly, we are taught that to “fear the Lord” is to **SEEK** the Lord in verse 4. It is one thing to bless, praise, boast of and magnify the Lord, and quite another deeper endeavor to SEEK Him diligently, in Bible reading and study, prayer, and personal meditation. And here David testifies that to SEEK the Lord is to receive answer and be delivered from all fears. It is further not to be ashamed, but be radiant in face. He speaks of his poverty of spirit, crying out for the Lord, and being saved from his troubles. What a testimony! And then, in verse 7, he declares that the *“angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him.”*

Psalm 34:7 is one passage that gives support to the thought of a *“guardian angel”* for everyone, or at least for believers. One can’t say that this passage *proves* the idea, but it is consistent with it. The Biblical truth of angels guarding and protecting us should be further incentive to always do good and put away evil. Those who FEAR the Lord will SEEK Him. And conversely, those who SEEK the LORD are those who FEAR Him.

3. Our third point or verse of the song, is to **TASTE** of the Lord and see that He is good. This is putting His goodness to the test. Just as we tested our parents discipline to (hopefully) discover

ultimately that they were disciplining us for our good and not harm, so as we test the moral guidelines of the Lord we discover that they are always for our good. To “taste” of the Lord is like getting a sample of ice cream to see if we like the flavor, only to find it delightful and good to our palate, and we crave more. David goes on to testify that *“to those who fear Him there is no want.”* Note that “tasting” of the Lord is yet another deeper endeavor into “fearing” Him. It is testing His character to find that He is always good, and testing his promises to discover that He is ever faithful to deliver, albeit in His perfect timing and will. David says that even young lions go hungry sometimes, but never those who seek and taste of the Lord’s goodness.

THE BENEFITS OF FEARING THE LORD (v. 15-22)

I will leave it to your personal study to discover the marvelous benefits of fearing the Lord in these closing verses. Suffice it to say that they include:

- God seeing our need (15a)
- God ever hearing our cry for help (15b)
- God defending us against our enemies (16)
- God delivering us from troubles (17)
- The Lord being especially near to the brokenhearted (18a)
- The Lord relieving us of a crushed spirit (18b)
- The Lord protecting us from physical harm (19-20)
- The Lord redeeming our soul from condemnation (21-22)

1000 years after David wrote this psalm, the Apostle Paul would write, *There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1)*. Even under the Old Covenant, David knew something about freedom from condemnation when he feared the Lord.

THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW

Let me leave you with this illustration which has always been super-helpful to me. Think of God’s perfect plan for you in this life as a straight line from birth to death. This would be the “straight and narrow path” that leads to heaven. This would be the life lived perfectly without sin – impossible of course with our sin nature, but nonetheless God’s standard. We see this picture in the familiar Proverbs 3:5-6 where we are promised that if we *“trust the Lord with all our heart ... He will make our path straight”* with no turns or detours.

It is both the love of God and the fear of God that keeps us walking on that straight and narrow. But when we sin in any small or larger way, we deviate off that straight path of God’s perfect will. And as God’s children who always hear the voice of the shepherd, we eventually sense the fear of the Lord, confess, receive his forgiveness and cleansing and return back to the straight road. But here’s the rub. When we return, we don’t go back to where we got off the straight road. We return somewhere down the path, having missed all the blessings that keeping on that narrow road would have afforded us. In other words, there are always consequences of sin. Sometimes the consequence is punishment. But it is always missed blessings – either in this life and/or the next. We sin, and we always miss out on some intended blessing of God.

We often wrongly think that if we sin we can confess and return with “no harm, no foul.” But *“God is not mocked.”* And God’s justice always demands payment for innocence lost.

So, may we His followers truly learn to correctly fear Him. Take the time to read this psalm again, and hear God say to you in your quiet place, *“Come you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.”*