

Fear of the Lord

In today's Psalm, Psalm 111, it closes with the verse "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever." When taking a cursory look at the number of times that the phrase "the fear of the Lord" occurs in the Bible, this exact phrase occurs between 3 and 47 times, depending on the translation that is used. This number would rise if we looked at the variations of the words used in the translations. It is used in both the Old and New Testaments and in the different types of literature found in the Bible - wisdom literature, historical writing and the writings of the prophets. Sometimes, it seems as if this is one of those phrases which we know what it means, yet is difficult to put into words. Additionally, that are different understandings of the phrase and depending on which understanding you accept will determine how you see God, the Bible and even life itself. So, it would do us wise to take a look at this phrase and see what it can mean and the implications for those meanings.

The main emphasis of the understanding of this phrase has vacillated over the years since the Bible was written. Without going too deep into the translation and meaning, the Hebrew word is mostly translated as 'awe.' It can also mean reverence, respect and worship. There is a connotation of trembling to this word as well. The Hebrew understanding incorporates all of these images. So with several understandings of this Hebrew word, it can become confusing as to which meaning the translator was intending. However, commentators have often centered on one of the understandings over the other ones throughout the centuries. Sometimes the understanding tended to being afraid; while at other times, the understanding has been towards being reverentially in awe.

Unfortunately, we tend to think of, not just the concept of this word, but for many words in terms of an either-or understanding - that the definition should be black or white. There usually is no concept of both-and definition of a term, especially an important term.

When hearing the word 'fear' one of the ways to understand it is to be afraid. It is like a child who is afraid of being punished if they break the rules of the parents. This kind of fear can transform into a fear of disappointing someone. When the emphasis of 'fear of the Lord' is on being afraid of God, being afraid of being punished, we get 'fire and brimstone' style sermons. These kinds of sermons focus on our propensity for doing wrong and then being punished by God who sends us to hell. It was the focus of this type of sermon to scare people into doing the right thing for being afraid of the punishment that would await us when we messed up.

Nowadays, the focus on the fear of the Lord is more on the reverential awe, recognizing the power of God to create and destroy. Associated with this focus is an emphasis on the forgiveness of God and that there is no accountability for one's actions. The story of where after we have died and are on trial with God as the judge and Satan as the prosecutor who details all of our misdeeds is an example of this. Just before God passes sentence on us, Jesus comes in and saves the day, accepting the punishment which we would have received. By extension, it would seem that nobody is sent to hell.

With these two extremes of understanding the phrase "the fear of the Lord," how is it that we should understand it? First off, I think we should incorporate the Hebrew understanding of the phrase and see it for all those understandings. We do not need to be exclusive in how we understand this phrase. By having a complete understanding, allows us to see God and ourselves in

a more complete way. For too long, humanity has bought into Satan's temptation that we can be God. It had never been good enough for us to be like God. By acknowledging that we are not God and can never be God, we can stand in awe of God's creation and marvel at the complexity of life. The closest we can come to 'creating' is just re-arranging what already has been created - making something new out of something old. We cannot make something out of nothing, especially just by speaking the way God did at the beginning of creation. In accepting our place in creation, we can also have a proper relationship with God and each other.

We can understand God's wishes for us, not as restrictions, but rather as guidance to life with God. By not accepting God as the ultimate giver of life, the ultimate everything, we have no boundaries - anything goes. We do not have any restrictions on what we do, we can do anything we want, anything that brings us pleasure and good things. That means that whoever is the biggest or strongest can make the rules and the rules can change at any time. By not accepting God, then nothing will matter, in the end everything is dust and to dust it all will return.

However, by believing in God we do recognize that everything has a place in creation and a purpose. We see that there are universal truths and that God wants to have good things but not at the expense of others. God assures us that there is enough from God for everybody to have all that is needed.

It is when we recognize our limitations and the limitlessness of God that we are able to be more than dust. We do see that in the 'fear of the Lord' we find ourselves just as we are - no more, no less; and we see God as the One who can make all things possible. It is in this fear that we are able to worship God, telling the world of the mighty deeds of God. It is this fear of the Lord that gives us the wisdom to see that we were made to help each other and not to use

others for our benefit. It is this wisdom that sees God for all that God is and we begin to know that nothing else can give us what God can and wants to give us.

In regard to the Gospel reading from Mark's Gospel account, it is revealed to us by the unclean spirit, those fallen angels from heaven, who recognize who Jesus is and they tell us of Jesus' identity. Mark also gives us a subtle clue to Jesus' identity. This clue is that it was believed that only God had control over unclean spirits. Since Jesus showed that He also had control over this unclean spirit, then we are to make the connection that Jesus is divine. Even the teaching that Jesus did at the synagogue was done in a manner that was not just repeating what rabbis from generations ago had taught. At that time, the Scribes and even the rabbis could not put forth teaching that was not consistent with what had previously been taught. New teachings could only come from those rabbis who were recognized by others as being able to put forth new interpretations to their Scriptures. So, in these few verses, Mark tells us that Jesus is divine because of the recognition of who He is by the unclean spirit and the way in which Jesus taught.

We have seen that when we properly understand the meaning of the "fear of the Lord" to include the reverential awe of God's power which leads to worship of God and a trembling of being afraid of what God could do to us, we get a better understanding of our place in creation and are able to see that God had sent Jesus to accomplish that which we, as created beings, cannot do.

May the Holy Spirit lead us to the wisdom that we need so that creation can be how God intended it to be.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/t-P1U5n6b1g>

Service: <https://youtu.be/6BSMLKVruDg>