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# Fear of the Lord

More Words of Life for the Church and for the World  
2015-16 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

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## PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

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## FOCUS

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Fear is a basic emotion of fallen humanity. It is usually thought of in a negative way, except when it is helpful in avoiding harm and danger. Many people live with fear daily, those who live in a war-torn land or those going through cancer treatment, for example. Others suffer from irrational fears or phobias that cripple them in their daily lives. Some may urge others that they need to conquer their fears. Yet what is the reaction when this word is combined with the words “of the Lord”? What is your reaction? What would be the reaction of the fearful? For many the reaction is negative, as toward the phrase “the wrath of God.” We would much rather hear about “the mercy of the Lord” and “the love of God.” The meaning of “the fear of the Lord” can be easily misunderstood. Rather than unpack the fullness of this phrase, many use the love of Christ as a means to dismiss this as a part of the Christian faith and the daily walk of this faith.

A study of “the fear of the Lord” as it is revealed to us in Holy Scripture and reflected in our Lutheran Confessions, reveals that “the fear of the Lord,” just like “the mercy of the Lord” and “the love of God,” is meant for our ultimate eternal benefit. We will also see that “the fear of the Lord” is part of the relationship that God has established with

His people, those first given the promises as the physical descendants of the patriarchs, and now, all who look back in faith to the salvation procured by the Promised One, Jesus Christ. “The fear of the Lord” is likewise a daily part of the lives of God’s people and shapes how we live those lives under His care. This relationship is with one who is over us in the ultimate position of power and authority. “The fear of the Lord” includes reverence and awe, which are foreign to most in our egalitarian society.

The phrase “the fear of the Lord,” and other ways to which it is referred, is more prominent in the Old Testament, particularly in the Pentateuch, Psalms and Proverbs than in the New Testament. It is set forth as the foundation for spiritual wisdom. It remains an essential part of the life of all of God’s people through all times and places. The specific phrase “the fear of the Lord” is found only 24 times in Holy Scripture (2 Chron. 14:14; 17:10; 19:7, 9; Job 28:28; Ps. 19:9; 34:11; 111:10; Prov. 1:7, 29; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:26, 27; 15:33; 16:6; 19:23; 23:17; Is. 11:2–3; 33:6; Acts 9:31). This study will also look at passages where similar words are used such as “fear of God” and where it is clear from the context that this specific “fear” is what is meant.

## SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

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The Hebrew verb *yare* means “to be afraid, stand in awe, fear.” It connotes the human reaction of fear. This can indicate being afraid of something or someone. When used regarding a person in a position of power and authority above others, it incorporates also reverence and a sense of awe. This includes one’s proper submission to God. The Hebrew noun *yirah* can mean “fear” or “reverence” in a more general sense, applied toward anyone or anything that may be feared. The Hebrew noun *mora* is more specific, used exclusively of an exalted being, including God. This can include also the meaning of “terror.”

The Greek noun *phobos* first had the meaning “flight,” then “that which may cause flight.” In the New Testament it can mean “fear, dread, terror” and “reverential fear.” This includes not only fear of God’s divine power and judgment, but also dread of displeasing Him to whom is directed

the trust and love of His people. The Greek verb *phobeo* similarly first meant “to put to flight.” It is used exclusively in the passive voice in the New Testament. It can mean “to fear, be afraid,” but also “to show reverence.” Also used a few times as fear, in the sense of “the fear of the Lord” in the New Testament, are the words *ekphobos*, *eulabeia* and *eulabemai*.

The first mention of fear in the Bible is at Gen. 3:10: “And he [Adam] said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.’” This is not “the fear of the Lord” but has its origin in the sin of Adam. All of our fears that are apart from God have their source in original sin passed down to us from Adam and are shown forth in our actual sins of thought, word and deed, of commission and omission. In contrast to this, consider Gen. 22:11–12: “But the angel of the Lord called

to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.'"

1. The Hebrew parallelism is very instructive of the nature of the fear of the Lord. This is in stark contrast to the word fear used any other way. What are some of the various aspects in the description of the fear of the Lord? (See Ps. 2:11; 5:7; 19:9; 22:23; 25:14; 31:19; 33:8,18; 34:9,11; 40:3; 66:16; 86:11; 111:5; 115:11, 13; 118:4, 6; 147:11; Prov. 1:7; 2:1-5; 3:7; 8:13; 9:10; 14:26-27; 15:26, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 23:17; Eccl. 5:7; 12:13.)

"Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses" (Ex. 14:31). In the Pentateuch, we see the fear of the Lord is the life as God's people as He has established His covenant, His benevolent relationship with His chosen people, the descendants of the patriarchs. He attached His covenant name, the Lord, to them in the fear of the Lord. (See Ex. 18:21; 20:20; Deut. 4:9-10; 6:1-2, 13-15, 24-25; 8:6-10; 14:23; 17:19-20; 31:12-13.)

Note how the fear of the Lord was to be central to their lives together as God's special people, God's chosen nation. The fear of the Lord would establish them in the Promised Land, and only by remaining in it would they retain their land and nation. The fear of the Lord was a requirement not only for the leaders in the tabernacle and later the temple, but also for their civil leaders. (See also 2 Sam. 23:2-4).

Their worship life was to be centered on the fear of the Lord and the rejection of all idols (see also 1 Kings 8:40, 43). In the fear of the Lord they were all to be students of Torah, the Law of God. Their daily individual lives were also to be shaped by the fear of the Lord. Note the connection in Lev. 19:14, 32; 25:17, 36, 43.

Repentance is also a part of life in the fear of the Lord. The call to repentance was a constant refrain to Israel, as it needs to be for us today. Eternal punishment is the end of all who do not fear the Lord. Restoration was graciously bestowed upon those who returned to the fear of the Lord. As you read and discuss these, note the context of these passages: Deut. 10:10-13; Joshua 24:14-15; 1 Samuel 12:14, 24; Jer. 2:19; 5:24; 32:39-40; Hosea 3:5; Zeph. 3:7; Haggai 1:12; Mal. 2:5; 3:5; 4:2; Luke 23:40-43.

We are only restored to live in the fear of the Lord because of Him who fulfilled Is.11:2-3a: "And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord." This is none other than the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

2. While it is not mentioned as much in the New Testament, the fear of the Lord remains a part of the life of all of God's people after the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of our Savior. Read and discuss: Acts 9:31; 2 Cor. 7:1; 1 Peter 1:17-19; 2:17; Rev. 14:7.

## CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

1. Faithful and ongoing catechesis is foundational for our understanding of the fear of the Lord. In the explanation of The First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods," we are taught that "we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." What is the significance of fear being grouped with love and trust?

Fear and love are bound with all the other Commandments, which are commentaries on this first and foremost Commandment. "We should fear and love God so that..."

Luther wrote in the Large Catechism:

"He declares how richly He will reward, bless, and do all good to those who hold them in high value and gladly do and live according to them. So God demands that all our works proceed from a heart that fears and regards God alone. From such fear the heart avoids everything that is contrary to His will, lest it should move Him to wrath. And, on the other hand, the heart also trusts in Him alone and from love for Him does all He wants. For

He speaks to us as friendly as a father and offers us all grace and every good.

This is exactly the meaning and true interpretation of the first and chief commandment, from which all the others must flow and proceed. So this word, “You shall have no other gods before Me” [Exodus 20:3], in its simplest meaning states nothing other than this demand: You shall fear, love, and trust in Me as your only true God. For where there is a heart set in this way before God, that heart has fulfilled this commandment and all the other commandments. On the other hand, whoever fears and loves anything else in heaven and upon earth will keep neither this nor any of the commandments.

So then all the Scriptures have everywhere preached and taught this commandment, aiming always at these two things: fear of God and trust in Him. The prophet David especially does this through the Psalms, as when he says ‘the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His steadfast love’ [Psalm 147:11]. He writes as if the entire commandment were explained by one verse, as if to say, ‘The Lord takes pleasure in those who have no other gods.’”<sup>1</sup>

We also confess that the fear of the Lord is not something we have in and of ourselves, because of our sinful nature and our bound will as far as spiritual matters are concerned. We have in the Augsburg Confession:

“Our churches teach that since the fall of Adam [Romans 5:12], all who are naturally born with sin [Psalm 51:5], that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with the inclination to sin, called concupiscence. Concupiscence is a disease and original vice that is truly sin. It damns and brings eternal death on those who are not born anew through Baptism and the Holy Spirit [John 3:5].”<sup>2</sup>

“Although nature is able in a certain way to do the outward work (for it is able to keep the hands from theft and murder), yet it cannot produce the inward motions, such as the fear of God, trust in God, chastity, patience, and so on.”<sup>3</sup>

“The ancient definition of original sin is that it is a lack of righteousness. This definition not only denies that mankind is capable of obedience in his body, but also denies that mankind is capable of knowing God, placing confidence in God, fearing and loving God, and certainly also the ability to produce such things. For even the theologians themselves teach in their schools that these are not produced without certain gifts and the aid of grace. In order that the matter may be understood, we say that these gifts are precisely the knowledge of God and fear and confidence in God. From these facts it appears that the ancient definition says precisely the same thing that we say, denying fear and confidence toward God. It denies not only the actions, but also the gifts and ability to produce these acts.”<sup>4</sup>

It is only because we are justified by grace through faith for Christ’s sake that we live in the fear of the Lord.

“This special faith (by which an individual believes that for Christ’s sake his sins are forgiven him, and that for Christ’s sake God is reconciled and sees us favorably) gains forgiveness of sins and justifies us. In repentance, namely, in terrors, this faith comforts and encourages hearts. It regenerates us and brings the Holy Spirit so that we may be able to fulfill God’s Law: to love God, truly fear God, truly be confident that God hears prayer, and obey God in all afflictions. This faith puts to death concupiscence and the like. So faith freely receives forgiveness of sins.”<sup>5</sup>

1 W. H. T. Dau and G.F. Bente, trans. P. T. McCain et.al., eds. “Concordia, the Faith of the Lutheran Church” as contained in *Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), pgs. 396–397.

2 Ibid., AC II.1–2, pgs. 31–32.

3 Ibid., AC XVIII.9, p. 41.

4 Ibid., AP II.23, page 78

5 Ibid., AP IV.45, page 88

## TEACHING AND PREACHING OF THE WORD

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1. Recall instances from the history of Israel, from the time of the Exodus out of Egypt to the return from exile in Babylonia, when the fear of the Lord was replaced in the hearts and lives of the people with fears brought about by the sinful nature. Compare these with the struggles of the New Israel, the Church Militant, today.
2. In what specific ways are the people we serve tempted to fear something or someone else than God?
3. God's people throughout history have been called to live in the fear of the Lord. But God also calls us to not fear anything or anyone else. Examine a number of these passages: Gen. 15:1; 21:17; 26:24; Ex. 14:13; 20:20; Deut. 1:21; 31:6, 8; Joshua 8:1; 10:25; Judges 6:23; 1 Kings 17:13; 1 Chron. 28:20; Is. 35:4; 41:10, 13, 14; 43:1, 5; 44:2, 8; Jer. 30:10; Ez. 3:9; Daniel 10:12, 19; Zeph. 3:16; Haggai 2:5; Zech. 8:13, 15; Matt. 1:20; 28:5; Mark 6:36; Luke 1:13; 1:30; 2:10; 5:10; 8:50; 12:32; Acts 27:24; Rev. 1:17. How can these apply to us today? How do God's words of "Fear not!" and "Do not be afraid!" motivate us in the fear of the Lord?
- Misunderstanding of the fear of the Lord can cause people to see God only as a stern and angry judge, as Martin Luther saw Him prior to the truth of the Gospel being revealed to Him by the Spirit through the Word. This may cause one to hate and dread God and to separate oneself from the means of grace in Christ's Church. A right understanding can remind us who we are as blood-bought sinners who have been made part of God's people, His own family. We live together with His children under His guidance and care. In awe and reverence for our Creator and Redeemer, we serve not only fellow believers but all people as His creatures and are led to treat them accordingly. In the gift of faith and work of the Holy Spirit, the fear of everything and everyone else is decreased and weakened, while the true fear of the Lord is increased and strengthened.
4. How can one help to bring a person to an understanding of the fear of the Lord when that person is completely ignorant of the meaning of the phrase?

## DISCUSSION

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1. What do we fear more than God as pastors?
2. Read and ponder for a moment Ps. 111:10: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!" How are we to practice it? How is a good understanding more than knowledge of Scripture and doctrine?
3. Read and discuss Matt. 10:26–33 and Luke 12:4–7. How does Jesus use the word "fear" and how does He encourage us in the fear of the Lord?

## SUMMARY

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The fear of the Lord is not a dread and terror of Him, which causes us to flee from and avoid Him, but rather draws us to Him in awe and reverence. He has called us into His people, His family, in the new covenant and testament in His Son. Empowered by the Holy Spirit we strive to "fear, love, and trust in God above all things." As we live under the cross in the forgiveness of sins, we live in the fear of the Lord together with brothers and sisters in Christ in the midst of this sinful world until His return in glory.