

What does it mean to “fear the Lord”?

There are several Hebrew and Greek words that are associated with the English term “fear,” and they include associated emotions and behaviors such as “terror, dread, anxious, tremble and terrifying.” When considering their various grammatical forms (i.e. verbs, adjectives, nouns, etc.), the Bible has at least 700 instances of “fear.” In studying the biblical examples with this term “fear,” one can gain a better understanding about ourselves, the emotion and what God intends behind its meaning.

In a discussion about discipleship, Jesus is aware of its cost and places in context the fears associated with it, “...; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matt 10:28). In context of the passage and, considering all possibilities of who is capable of this destruction, only God has this power. What kind of fear is this, and what does it reveal about the love of God?

The Old Testament cites several instances where God speaks to human beings about fear in regard to Himself.

In one of the earliest examples, the Angel of the Lord, understood as the pre-incarnate form of Jesus Christ (see the article: “Who is ‘the Angel of the Lord / God’?”), draws a connection between fear and obedience to God’s word. In this instance, Abraham, who is lauded for his faith (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3; Heb 11:8-19), fears to disobey God in his offering of Isaac.

But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” (Gen 22:11-12)

Then the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, “By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” (Gen 22:15-18)

Abraham’s act of obedience is commended twice by the Angel of the Lord. But what was the nature of Abraham’s fear?

Unlike any other human being, Abraham was a recipient of great blessing (Gen 12:1-3, 7; 13:2, 14-17; 14:20; 15:1-21; 17:1-21), and had a relationship with God like no other (Gen 18:1-2, 23-33). He was a witness of supernatural events (Gen 12:17) as well as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:27-28). However, as Abraham sees the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Bible does not record him as having any of the fear that Israel expressed when they witnessed God’s power against the Egyptians (Ex 14:31).

It may be significant to observe that for the nation of Israel, fear was a motive for their belief in God (Ex 14:31), and there is debate whether this was a genuine saving faith. In contrast, the promise of blessing was a motive for Abraham’s faith which God deemed as righteous (Gen 15:4-6). In similar fashion, Jesus offered the promise of blessing through the gospel to draw mankind to faith (Mark 16:15-16).

Abraham’s fear appears to be rooted in two concepts.

1) Abraham clearly trusted God’s word. God promised him an heir (Gen 15:2-6), and if the Lord requested that he sacrifice his only son (Gen 22:1-2), he believed and trusted that God would provide another.

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2) Recognizing God as “Judge of all the earth” while discussing Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:10-33; 19:27-29), Abraham respected and trusted God’s righteous character. Abraham also understood that he was “nothing but dust and ashes” (Gen 18:27).

Despite the potential loss of his son, whom he loved, Abraham feared disobeying the Lord God. Abraham’s faith and reverence was genuine, because he trusted and obeyed God and feared to disobey the righteous Judge over all earth. Thus Abraham can stand before God in fear and love. In contrast, in their Exodus, the nation of Israel based their fear on God’s display of power (Ex 14:31); because they did not recognize and trust His righteous character, they did not fear His judgment. Despite their “fear of the Lord” and making a covenant with God (Ex 24:3), they broke the most important commandment and committed idolatry with a golden calf (Ex 32:1-7).

This idea that to fear God is in the context of fearing to disobey Him can be seen in God’s commands in the Deuteronomic legislation. In all instances when God speaks of fear, the Hebrew term *yâre’* is used including the earlier mention of Abraham. Without consideration of the stems used with Hebrew, *yâre’* essentially means “to fear, be afraid” or “to stand in awe of, be awed” or “to fear, reverence, honor, respect.”

You shall not curse a deaf man, nor place a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall revere (**yâre’**) your God; I am the Lord. (Lev 19:14)

You shall rise up before the grayheaded and honor the aged, and you shall revere (**yâre’**) your God; I am the Lord. (Lev 19:32)

So you shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear (**yâre’**) your God; for I am the Lord your God. (Lev 25:17)

Do not take usurious interest from him, but revere (**yâre’**) your God, that your countryman may live with you. (Lev 25:36)

You shall not rule over him with severity, but are to revere (**yâre’**) your God. (Lev 25:43)

Just as “fear God” is in the context of “fear to disobey Him”, there are several instances of where God says “do not fear” in the context of encouragement and continual obedience to Him; it was a command not to panic or hinder obedience to Him.

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, “**Do not fear**, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.” (Gen 15:1)

Just before this, in gratitude for the defeat of Chedorlaomer and his allies, the king of Sodom offered Abraham wealth which Abraham declined; Abraham’s allegiance was to God and not available to any other being (Gen 14:22).

The Lord appeared to him the same night and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham; **Do not fear**, for I am with you. I will bless you, and multiply your descendants, For the sake of My servant Abraham.” (Gen 26:24).

In this instance, despite the famine, God instructed Isaac to stay in the land. If obeyed, God will be with Isaac and bless him. Isaac does indeed stay and contends with the conflicts that might otherwise force him out (Gen 26:1-22).

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But the Lord said to Moses, “**Do not fear** him, for I have given him into your hand, and all his people and his land; and you shall do to him as you did to Sihon, king of the Amorites, who lived at Heshbon.” (Num 21:34; Deut 3:2)

While the region of Bashan was part of the promise, the Transjordan was not the heart of the Promised Land. In this early stage of the Conquest, Sihon, king of the Amorites was Israel’s first significant military opponent and king Og of Bashan was also of the same caliber. The nation of Israel is learning that, in war, they are victorious when obedient to His word.

Now the Lord said to Joshua, “**Do not fear** or be dismayed. Take all the people of war with you and arise, go up to Ai; see, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land. (Josh 8:1)

As the first city to fall in the Conquest, all of Jericho’s contents was consecrated to the Lord (Josh 6:17-21); however, Achan took some items from Jericho that he coveted (Josh 7:1). This sin violated the nation’s covenant with God and caused Him to withdraw His blessing, and the nation of Israel failed in their initial attempt at taking the city of Ai (Josh 7:4-5). Just as God’s judgment on the Canaanites was the consequence of their sin, Achan’s judgment was the consequence of his sin (Josh 7:24-26). With God’s wrath satisfied, Joshua was able to resume the Conquest.

The Lord said to Joshua, “**Do not fear** them, for I have given them into your hands; not one of them shall stand before you.” (Josh 10:8)

5 kings and their large armies attack Israel’s vassal Gibeon (Josh 10:1-6). Joshua’s rescue party endures the 25 mile march from Gilgal under darkness, includes an ascent of 3,300 feet to Gibeon and conducts a surprise attack (Josh 10:9-11). Joshua’s miraculous victory is often called “Joshua’s long day” and is recognized as the third and last great miracle in the book of Joshua.

Recognizing God’s righteous and holy character demands obedience to His word; however, the demand for obedience is for the benefit and sanctification of the Believer and enables a genuine relationship with the holy God. When God commands to “fear God” or “do not be afraid,” it is in this context of obedience and, as the Believer is the beneficiary, a demonstration of His love.

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.” (Ex 20:20)

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