

The fear of God And the awe of God

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Biblical references to 'the fear of God' and 'the awe of God'

The phrases 'fear of God' and 'fear of the LORD' have essentially the same meaning. The reason for spelling the word LORD in capital letters in the Old Testament is that it is a translation of the original Hebrew JHVH, Jehovah or Yahweh. This spelling helps to distinguish it from 'Lord' in the New Testament, where it often, but not always, refers to Jesus. The fear of God is a major phrase in the section of the Old Testament known as the 'Writings' (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs). It is a benevolent, protective kind of fear, not a threatening, frightening one.

To fear the LORD is to recognise Him for who He is : all-powerful, all-knowing, all-wise, all-righteous and totally pure and holy. When we regard God correctly, we gain a clearer picture of ourselves : [we are] sinful, weak, frail and needy. When we recognise who God is and who we are, we will fall at His feet in humble respect. Only then will He show us how to choose His way. *(adapted from a footnote to Psalm 25 : 12 NIV)*

Comment : The fear of God and awe of God are strongly linked by the notion of 'reverence'. Fear is a response that has to do with God's absolute sovereignty and authority, and His control over the whole of the universe. Awe has to do with our deep respect or reverence for His supernatural excellence and majesty, yet also for His compassion. Together they inspire a willingness to submit to His righteousness and a desire to worship Him. The fear of God leads us to ask Him how He wants us to live our lives as His children, while our awe for God draws us closer to Him and makes us embrace God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and adore and glorify Him above all else.

References to the fear of God in the Bible : Old and New Testaments

Most of them are in the Old Testament. References are from the N.I.V. Life Application Study Bible, copyrighted in 1988.

Deuteronomy 31 : 12-13 : (12)“Assemble the people ... so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully ... (13) Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and [also] learn to fear the LORD your God as long as ...”. (*in part from footnote*)

Joshua 24 : 14 : “Now fear the LORD and serve Him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the river [the Euphrates] and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.”

Isaiah 33 : 5-6 : (5a) “The LORD is exalted, for He dwells on high ; (6b) ... a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge ; the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure [*or is a treasure from Him*].”

2 Chronicles 19 : 6-7, 9 : (6) He [king Jehoshaphat] told them, “Consider carefully what you do,[the king was appointing a number of judges] because you are not judging for man but for the LORD, who is with you whenever you give a verdict. (7) Now let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Judge carefully, for with the LORD our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery.” (9) You must serve faithfully and wholeheartedly in the fear of the LORD.

Job 1 : 1, 8 : (1b) This man was blameless and upright ; he feared God and shunned evil. (8b) There is no man like him ; ... a man who fears God and shuns evil.

Psalms 19 : 9 : *King David is the main author of the book of Psalms.* The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.

Psalms 2 : 11 : Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.

Psalms 25 : 12, 14 : (12) Who, then, is the man that fears the LORD ? He [God] will instruct him in the way chosen for him. He will spend his days in prosperity, and his descendants will inherit the land. (14) The LORD confides in those who fear Him ; He makes His covenant known to them.

Psalms 33 : 8 : Let all the earth fear the LORD ; let all the people of the world revere Him.

Psalms 34 : 9 : Fear the LORD, you His saints, for those who fear Him lack nothing.

Psalms 76 : 7 : You alone are to be feared ; who can stand before You when You are angry ?

Psalms 86 : 11 : Teach me Your way, o LORD, and I will walk in Your truth ; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear Your name.

Psalms 111 : 10 : The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom ; all who follow His precepts have good understanding. To Him belongs eternal praise.

Psalms 118 : 4 : Let those who fear the LORD say, “His love endures forever.”

Psalms 128 : 1 : Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in His ways.

Psalms 145 : 19 : He fulfils the desires of those who fear Him ; He hears their cry and saves them.

Psalms 147 : 11 : The LORD delights in those who fear Him, who put their hope in His unfailing love.

Proverbs 1 : 7 : *Most of the proverbs were written by King Solomon.* The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge ...

Proverbs 9 : 10 : The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Proverbs 10 : 27 : The fear of the LORD adds length to life, but the years of the wicked are cut short.

Proverbs 14 : 26 : He who fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge.

Proverbs 19 : 23 : The fear of the LORD leads to life ; then one rests content, untouched by trouble.

Proverbs 22 : 4 : Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honour and life.

Proverbs 31 : 30 : Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting ; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

Ecclesiastes 12 : 13 : *By king Solomon* : Now all has been heard ; here is the conclusion of the matter : Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man.

Isaiah 11 : 2-3 : (2) The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him [the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ] ; the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD ; (3) and He will delight in the fear of the LORD.

Malachi 3 : 16 : Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in His presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honoured His name.

Footnote : God will remember those who remain faithful to Him, and who love, fear, honour and respect Him.

Luke 12 : 5 : *Jesus speaking* : “But I will show you whom you should fear : Fear Him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him.”

Philippians 2 : 12-13 : *The apostle Paul* : (12) Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed -- not only in my presence but now much more in my absence -- continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, (13) for it is God who works in you, to will and to act according to His good purpose.

1 Peter 1 : 14-17 : (14) “As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. (15) But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do. (16) For it is written : “Be holy, because I am holy.” [Leviticus 11 : 4445] (17) Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.”

1 Peter 2 : 17 : “Show proper respect to everyone : Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king.”

Revelation 14 : 7 : *The apostle John* : He [an angel proclaiming the gospel to the whole world] said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgement has come. Worship Him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

References to the awe of God in the Bible : Old and New Testaments

Job 25 : 2 : Dominion and awe belong to God. *From Bildad, one of Job's comforters.*

Ecclesiastes 5 : 7 : Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God. *Footnote to Eccl. 3 : 14 (adapted) : What is the purpose of life ? It is that we should revere the all-powerful God. To 'revere' God means to respect and*

stand in awe of Him because of who He is. Purpose in life starts with whom we know, not what we know or how good we are. It is impossible to fulfil [one's] God-given purpose unless [one] revere[s] God and gives Him first place in [one's] life.

Isaiah 29 : 23 : When they see among them their children, the work of My hands, they will keep My name holy ; they will acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel. *Footnote : The world described here, under Christ's rule, will be far different from the one we live in today. There will be no more violence or gloom. This new world will be characterised by joy, understanding, justice and praise to God.*

Jeremiah 2 : 17-19 : *God, speaking through Jeremiah :*

(17)“...Have you not brought this on yourselves by forsaking the LORD your God, when He led you in the way ? (19) Your wickedness will punish you ; your backsliding will rebuke you. Consider then, and realise how evil and bitter it is for you when you forsake the LORD your God and have no awe of Me,” declares the LORD, the LORD almighty.

Comment : Verse 19 is known as the 'key verse' in Jeremiah.

Much of Jeremiah's prophecy is about God's judgement of Judah for their idolatry. That was the reason they lost their awe for the one true God.

Habakkuk 3 : 1-2 : (1) A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet [...].

(2) LORD, I have heard of your fame ; I stand in awe of Your deeds, o LORD.

Footnote : Habakkuk did not ask to escape the discipline, but he accepted the truth that Judah needed to learn a lesson. God still disciplines in love to bring His children back to Him (Hebrews 12 : 5-6). Jeremiah and Habakkuk prophesied at approximately the same time in the history of the Old Testament.

Malachi 2 : 5, 8 : (*The LORD God speaking*) (5) “My covenant was with him [with Levi, Mal. 2 : 4] a covenant of life and peace [Numbers 25 : 12] and I gave them [priests of the tribe of Levi] to him ; this called for reverence, and he revered Me and stood in awe of My name. (8) But you [the priests in Malachi's day] have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble ; ...”

Matthew 9 : 6b-8 : (6b) Then He [Jesus] said to the paralytic, “Get up, take your mat and go home.” (7) And the man got up and went home. (8) When the crowd saw him, they were filled with awe ; and they praised God, ...

Luke 5 : 24-26 : *Jesus speaking* : (24)“... But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins ...” He said to the paralysed man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat, and go home.” (25) Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. (26) Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said ...

Luke 7 : 11, 15-16 : (11) ... Jesus went to a town called Nain, and His disciples and a large crowd went along with Him. (15) The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. (16) They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help His people.”

Hebrews 12 : 28-29 : (28) Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, (29) for our God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. *Footnote : God is a consuming fire, because He is morally perfect, He hates sin and cannot*

accept those who [commit] it. Moses' sin (Numbers 20 : 11-12) kept him from entering the promised land, and no sacrifice could remove that judgement. Sin kept us from entering God's presence, but Jesus Christ paid the penalty for our sin and removed God's judgement forever by His death.

A few final comments on the fear and awe of God

From where the earliest mention of the fear of God is made in Deuteronomy, it is clear that God required the Israelites, young and old, His own special, chosen people (Deut.7 : 6 ; Psalm 33 : 12), to learn to fear Him. He strongly and strictly required every Israelite to fear Him for his or her own good, and to “throw away” any other “gods” (Joshua 24) ! Quite striking is what the Bible says about Job, that he was not only upright but that he feared God ... even though he was not an Israelite. Neither was Bildad for that matter. It appears that his deep fear or reverence for God was why he had such a strong faith and confidence in Him. Job's reverence was probably also the reason for his great success as a farmer.

We see that the fear of God brings tremendous benefits. By commanding a healthy fear of Him, God the Father is saying, “You will completely and reverently submit to Me not only because My power is absolute, but because My love for you is absolute as well. Through My love for you I want to instruct you, provide for you, teach you to walk in My ways and My wisdom, and fulfil your desires.” We find these benefits in the book of Psalms. Proverbs has further benefits : it teaches that the fear of God adds years to our life, it secures refuge and protection, contentment, wealth and even praise (honour).

In the New Testament both Jesus Himself (Luke 12) and the apostle Paul (Philippians 2) strongly commend fearing God for our own eternal benefit ! The Lord Jesus left no doubt as to God

the Father's power in the matter of a person's eternal life or death.

Regarding our awe for God, He personally also spoke about awe for Himself (or rather the absence of it, and the consequences) through the prophet Jeremiah, who foretold disaster, no less, upon the nation of Israel and their city, Jerusalem, because of their shocking idolatry and other wickedness before Almighty God. Hundreds of years earlier when Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy were written, God had made Himself clear about His chosen people's correct relationship with Him. See for example Ex. chapters 19, 20 : 1-23 ; Lev. 26 ; Num. 33 : 50-55 ; Deut. chapters 4 to 10.

There were still a few people, including a prophet like Habakkuk, who truly remained in awe of God and who accepted that God's punishment of His chosen people was, sadly, a necessary discipline that God was bound to carry out. While He is a loving God, He is also the beginning and end of perfect justice ! “I stand in awe of Your deeds, o LORD.” (Habakkuk 3 : 2) Let us not waver from standing in fear and awe of His absolute righteousness !

As we have seen, references to the awe of God in the New Testament are found in the gospels, when Jesus healed a man and raised another man from the dead, and in Hebrews. It appears that the people only experienced the awe of God after a miracle. Job and those living even earlier, like Noah, had no written Word of God to strengthen them. Psalms and Proverbs had not been written yet ! It appears that during Jesus' ministry, people were not in continual fear or awe of God all the time, as Job had been.

As we saw in Hebrews, let us worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. Let us not allow a day to pass without what David teaches in Psalm 103 :

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is His love for those who fear Him ; as far
as the east is from the west, so far has He
removed our transgressions from us,
As a Father has compassion on His children, so
the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him,
for He knows how we are formed, He remembers
that we are dust.

But from everlasting to everlasting the
LORD's love is with those who fear Him,
and His righteousness with their children's children ---
with those who keep His covenant
and remember to obey His precepts.
(Psalm 103 : 11-14 ; 17-18)

