

A BIBLICAL STUDY ON FEAR
LESSON NINE: FEAR OF THE LORD

by Sandy Harber

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Hebrews 10:31

When the Bible talks about fearing the Lord it includes two aspects of "fear." On the one hand it means a reverential awe generated by the realization that God is the eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, Creator of "heaven and earth, the sea and all that in them is" (Exodus 20:11). On the other hand, it means apprehension and intimidation engendered by the recognition of God's majesty and holiness and our own vile sinfulness. One aspect draws us closer to God in worship and praise. The other aspect restrains us, causing us to shrink back in shame and acknowledgment of our unworthiness. It is this second aspect that I want to discuss here.

When He was on earth, Jesus counseled people to not fear human beings who could only harm their physical bodies but fear God Who had the power to destroy both their physical body and their soul in hell (Matthew 10:28). This is one instance when men were instructed to "fear" (that is, be afraid of, frightened of, alarmed at) God. Why? Because He has the power and authority to condemn people to eternal damnation.

We don't like to think of God in this manner. We like the God of love, mercy, and grace. We don't want to dwell on the God of judgment and wrath. Pastors in this day and age are advised to eliminate sermons on sin and hell. But how can we present the Savior if we don't explain what He is saving us from?

And once we have accepted Jesus as Savior - and hell is off the table - is there any reason to "fear" God in that apprehensive-intimidating-shrinking back aspect? The simple answer is "yes." We are still sinners - saved sinners but not perfect, righteous, and holy like Christ, our example. Consequently there are times when God must deal with us as unruly children. He chastens those He loves (Hebrews 12:5-11). And, He loves you. Chastening is not fun. But when we understand that God will punish us for disobedience we have a reason to "fear" (be apprehensive of or intimidated by) Him. This type of fear is good because it encourages us to be obedient to His Word and refrain from sin (Proverbs 16:6).

Hebrews 10:26-31 tells us what happens to believers who fall away from the Truth. Apostates. These apostates sin willfully in turning their backs on the faith (v. 26). They stomp all over the Son of God, treating with disrespect the One Who saved them (v. 29). They treat the precious blood He shed to atone for their sins as common or profane (v. 29). Their attitude is an insult to the Holy Spirit Who drew them into the family of God (Romans 8:15). They have already received Jesus as their Savior in the past. What can they do now that they have willfully put themselves on the side of God's enemies (v. 27)? Jesus cannot be sacrificed a second time for their sins (v. 26). All that is left is "a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation" which shall devour them (v. 27). God claims His vengeance and He will judge His people (v. 30). Notice they have not lost their salvation - they are still His people. But "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (v. 31). "Fearful" is the Greek "phoberos," which means "frightful; terrible."

John warns us that there is a "sin unto death" (I John 5:16). We have the examples of Ananias and Sapphira who died for trying to lie to the Spirit of God (Acts 5:1-11). Result? "Great fear came on all them that heard these things" (Acts 5:5, 11). Paul warned the Corinthian Church that God had taken some of their number in death because they had misused the communion table (I Corinthians 11:30). The "fear" of God that makes us consider our words and actions lest we displease our Lord is a good thing. Our God is holy, righteous, and just, and we should rightly be intimidated by the knowledge that He sees everything we do, hears everything we say, and knows our every thought.

*"By mercy and truth iniquity is purged; and by the fear of the Lord men depart from evil."
Proverbs 16:6*