Should Christians Fear God?

Andrew Selley 18 May 2017



It is taught in various Christian circles that Christians need never fear God because they are under grace. Some teach that the New Testament commands to fear have to do more with awe and wonder. The kind of fear they are describing is comparable with our experience when we observe beautiful things like the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls – never with dread, terror, or as a motivation to not sin.

Are Christians Commanded to Fear God?

So is this true? First, let's look at whether Christians are commanded to fear God. Let's begin with a look at ratios – the word 'fear' is used 100 times in the New Testament. This is 98.2% as many times in the New Testament as it is in the Old. Practically speaking, this seems to imply that fear is used to motivate holiness as many times in the New Testament as in the Old Testament.

Under grace, New Testament Christians are commanded to fear God many times. At times, entire churches were gripped with the fear of God (See Acts 5:11; 9:51 and 2 Corinthians 7:11). In the case of the Corinthian church, they rightly felt 'fear' as a result of their sin, which produced repentance within them.

Fear which produces holiness is a common New Testament concept. Peter uses fear as a tool for

holy living when he commanded, '...conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile' (1 Peter 1:17). Paul does the same in many places, like Romans 11:20 and 1 Timothy 5:20. In Philippians 2:12, Paul calls the Philippians to obey Christ and 'work out your salvation with fear and trembling'. In 2 Corinthians 7:1 it says 'bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God'. Clearly the New Testament writers saw fear as a motivation for holiness!

So what kind of fear is the Bible referring to? Is it true that the fear we should feel is more akin to awe, or should we rather fear in the normal sense of the word, possibly even with the thought of potential punishment in mind?

A Study of the Word 'Fear' in the New Testament

The two primary Greek words used in the New Testament for fear are 'phobeo' (used 51 times) and 'phobos' (used 36 times).

Phobeo is used the most. It is a verb which means to do something for fear of harm, like running away in terror from a hungry lion. This is properly shown when Paul speaks about a criminal who should fear punishment by secular authorities if he commits a crime (Romans 13:3). Thus 'phobeo' is an actual fear causing a response in us because of the consequences which lie ahead. I won't jump off a 10-storey building because I fear the consequence of hitting the ground!

Some places where this word is used for Christians: 1 Peter 2:17, which says, 'Fear God.', Hebrews 4:1, Revelation 11:8 and Revelation 19:5. Therefore, God wants us to fear Him this way because He knows this will help to keep us holy.

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The other Greek word I mentioned, 'phobos', generally means fear or a state of terror. We get the English word 'phobia' from this root. It means an extreme or irrational fear. Some places where this word is used are 1 Peter 1:17, Philippians 2:12 and 2 Corinthians 7:11. So we learn that 'fear' means that we are to actually fear God, as well as the consequences of not obeying Him. This should terrify us!

There can be no doubt for any student of the New Testament that love is the primary motivation and tool to bring about righteous Christian living. Proof of this is that it is used nearly double the times that fear is used in the New Testament as a motivational force. However, this does not change the fact that fear is clearly also needed for the Christian to properly relate to God.

Church History

When we study Church history on the subject, our findings here are precisely in line with what has been taught throughout the Christian ages. Jonathan Edwards sums up our findings beautifully in his writing 'Treaties concerning the religious affections', published in 1796. He says,

'So hath God contrived and constituted things in his dispensations toward his own people that when their love decays and the exercises of it fail or become weak, fear should arise; for then they need it to restrain them from sin and to excite them to care for the good of their souls and so to save them up to watchfulness and diligence in religion: but God hath so ordered that when love rises and is in vigorous exercise, then fear should vanish and be driven away for then they need it not, having a higher and more excellent principle in exercise to restrain them from sin and stir them up from their duty.

There are no other principles which human nature is under the influence of that will ever make men conscientious but one of these two, fear or love: and therefore if one of these should not prevail as the other decayed, God's people when fallen into dead and carnal frames, when love is asleep would be lamentably exposed indeed. And therefore God has wisely ordained, that these two opposite principles of love and fear should rise and fall like the two opposite scales of a balance; when one rises the other sinks…
Fear is cast out by the Spirit of God, no other way than by the prevailing of love: nor is it ever maintained by his Spirit but when love is asleep…'

Objections

I anticipate two Scriptural objections in response to this. Let me show why they do not contradict our finding.

Romans 8:15 'For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption…'

In this Scripture, Paul is encouraging us that we have received the Holy Spirit and have been given a new nature in Christ, which means that we are no longer slaves of sin. The power of sin is broken in us who are born again. He compares this with unredeemed man who can only fear because he cannot properly relate to God. Unredeemed man is thus still in 'slavery' to sin, and should only fear God in that state. We as Christians have been redeemed by the Spirit of adoption, and as long as we remain in Jesus by the Holy Spirit, we need not 'fear'. Fear is only a tool for the rebellious, and we are not like that anymore (unless of course we choose that course and sow to the flesh, see verse 13).

The second objection might come from 1 John 4:8 'there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.' I

believe Jonathan Edwards answers this Scripture beautifully, as quoted above.

> In fact, it is both the love of God and the fear of God that motivate us to live lives of holiness.

So to conclude then, both the teaching that Christians should not fear God and that the meaning of ‘fear’ in the New Testament should be understood to mean ‘awe’ are both modern-day myths and actually false. In fact, it is both the love of God and the fear of God that motivate us to live lives of holiness. I pray that the defense of this truth will be a source of blessing and health to those of us following after Christ.