



“Building Up the Local Church in the Fear of God” **SELECTED SCRIPTURES IN THE BOOK OF ACTS**

INTRODUCTION

People who have a high view of themselves or their fellow man have a low view of God and lack fearing God as they ought. In perhaps the best book on counseling people to overcoming peer pressure and the fear of man, Ed Welch writes in *When People Are Big and God Is Small*,

“All experiences of the fear of man share at least one common feature: people are big. They have grown to idolatrous proportions in our lives. They control us. Since there is no room in our hearts to worship both God and people, whenever people are big, God is not. Therefore, the first task in escaping the snare of the fear of man is to know that God is awesome and glorious, not other people.”¹

Those are much needed words for the church today. Why?

- Because the church has belittled teaching on sin and exchanged it for positive messages and self-esteem helps and devotionals.
- Because the church has replaced the biblical attributes and makeup of the church for programs and pragmatics ways of reaching people.
- Because the church teaches it’s people God relates to them in a way where it comes across He is equal or their buddy and not transcendent as their Master

The church is too user-friendly. It seems to be finding ways to remove the fear of God rather than promote it. In his book *Made In Our Image*, Steven Lawson wisely writes,

“It seems that everything today is geared to make us comfortable, but not convicted; amused, but not in awe. In our efforts to make seekers more at ease in church, we have downplayed the reverential awe we should feel in the presence of almighty God. We have so emphasized the horizontal aspect of our relationship – our intimacy and closeness with Him – that the vertical aspect – our reverence, awe, and fear toward him – has been almost totally neglected.

¹ When People Are Big and God Is Small, pg. 95.

“Sit under many of the sermons being preaching, listen to many of the choruses being sung, and read many of the books that are being written, and you will see that there is, for the most part, little of a high view of God being spoken, sung, or read about. As a result, there is very little that would instill in hearts a healthy, holy fear of God.

“We live in a day in which a god made in our image has swept into our churches like a flood, and with it has come an unhealthy casualness toward God that often borders on blasphemy.”²

In the O.T. when people encountered God, they didn’t perform skits or dances on stage, they fell on their faces devastated by that divine encounter.

What does it mean to fear God? What does it mean? Ed Welch in his book suggests there are 2 aspects to fearing God.

1. **Fearing God means we are afraid of His holiness, because we are unclean.** It means we know that we have to appear before an Almighty God as sinners. That should strike fear in our hearts as we measure ourselves with divine perfection.
2. **Fearing God also means a reverent submission to Christ that leads to immediate obedience.** When Solomon sums up everything in his life with fear God and keep His commandments (Ecc 12:13), those are in a purposeful order. Fearing God leads to obedience of Him.

This 1st aspect drives the next. It is because He is righteous and I by nature am not that I surrender to His Lordship in obedience.

With over 150 references to the fear of God in the Bible – most of them being in the O.T. – we obviously don’t have time to consider them all. But for our purposes today, we are addressing the theme building up the church through or by the fear of God. So I thought it appropriate to see the early church fearing God.

SELECTED SCRIPTURES

I. Acts 2:40-43

ACTS 2:40-42 – [40] And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation; [41] then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. [42] And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

They did exactly what God told them to do. They were mathematically parallel to God’s law; they obeyed with no hesitation. Why is this so significant? Because obedience is a mark of what? It is a mark of a genuine believer. What did they obey?

² Made In Our Image, pg. 194.

- They submitted to the teaching of doctrine (vs. 42a).
- They enjoyed real fellowship (vs. 42b).
- They broke bread with one another (vs. 42c).
- They prayed every time they were together (vs. 42d).

ACTS 2:43 – Then fear came upon every soul, ...

“***Fear***” is reverence. It is reserved for times when people's minds are struck with an awe based on the powerful, divine or something beyond their ability to explain or to handle. The word for “***fear***” in the context of fearing God means that people were struck by something divine they could not explain (e.g., when miracles occurred in the Gospels). John MacArthur explains,

“Sometimes in your lives you've felt that, haven't you? You've seen God work and you've just kind of stood there and it was just kind of unreal. Every soul kept feeling a sense of awe about that church. I wonder if we affect the community like that?”³

John Piper makes the argument that the fear of God is what makes every other attribute of the church hang together. He says,

“What makes all this hang together? What's the driving force that made those believers free from their possessions, and eager to meet needs, and full of gladness and generosity and praise and prayer when they ate together day after day?”

“I think the key is found in verse 43 in the phrase, ‘fear came upon every soul’ – a joyful, trembling sense of awe that you don't trifle with the God of the apostles. That is not our experience. Today for most people, including most professing Christians, God is an idea to talk about, or an inference from an argument, or a family tradition to be preserved. But for very few people is God a stark, fearsome, stunning, awesome, shocking present reality. He is tame. He is distant. He is silent. Where are the churches of whom Luke could say today, ‘Fear - awe, wonder, trembling - is upon every soul’?”

“The absence of this fear has a direct effect on the way we accumulate possessions for ourselves, the way we ignore the needy, the way we trivialize fellowship, and the way we pray more than we pray.”

“This is another reason why my heart longs for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in an extraordinary way. If the awesome teaching of the apostles would stand forth the way it did in Peter's preaching on Pentecost, and if the Lord confirmed his truth with wonders and signs, this holy, happy fear would come upon the church, and material possessions would become as nothing, except to serve

³ “The First Fellowship,” http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/1709_The-First-Fellowship.

others; people, not things, would become precious beyond words; and when we met each other, we would meet God. And prayer would be everywhere.”⁴

And so this became a consistent attribute of the early church, as we will now see in 5 more passages in the Book of Acts.

II. Acts 5:1-11

ACTS 5:1-2 [1] But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. [2] And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet.

This was probably a family serving faithfully in the church. The husband and leader of his home was name Ananias and his wife's name was Sapphira. Like Barnabas, they too sold some land. But unlike Barnabas, they didn't give the proceeds to the Lord's work (Acts 4:36-37). Ananias and Sapphira kept it to themselves.

What was their sin? They had made some type of commitment publicly that they would give their monies to the church and they didn't. That was their sin. They were hypocrites. Thus, they were not living with the fear of God before their eyes.

ACTS 5:3-4 [3] But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? [4] While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.'

Peter concludes they not only lied to the church but they allowed Satan to gain a foothold in their life – a contrast to Barnabas. Barnabas was led by the Spirit to give all his monies back to the church; Ananias and Sapphira were led by Satan to keep their monies from the church. They had misrepresented and purposefully deceived the church! Their ultimate sin: not lying to man but to God! Look at what happens to Ananias first.

ACTS 5:5-6 – [5] Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. [6] And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.

He just died! No opportunity for explanation or excuse was given; he just died. God judged him on the spot! And he died immediately. As a result, “**great fear**” came upon all who heard about this. That might be an understatement! People grew afraid about their own hypocrisy and sin in the church, and they should have been. Death can be a consequence of sin and we are not through seeing death in this family.

⁴ “The Fear of God and Freedom from Goods,” <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/the-fear-of-god-and-freedom-from-goods>.

ACTS 5:7-11 - [7] Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. [8] And Peter answered her, 'Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?'

She said, 'Yes, for so much.'

[9] Then Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.'

[10] Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband. [11] So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

Unaware of what had happened, his wife came into the room⁵ and discovered she was a widow. Her grief and mourning was brief and she quickly conceived to lie about the money again. And her fate: immediate death as well.

It is unwise to trifle with the things of God. Fear filled this body of Christ and did you notice on who else? "*All who heard these things.*" In other words, the word got around in the community of these events and people's fear of God spread. They were probably thinking, "Woah! Did you hear about God's judgment of this couple for their deceit? Don't go to church there, you might die!"

III. Acts 9:26-31

Paul had just been converted on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19). He immediately began preaching Christ and wasn't well received because most didn't know he was converted; many doubted whether his conversion was authentic.

ACTS 9:26-30 – [26] And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. [27] But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. [28] So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. [29] And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists (picking up where Stephen left off), but they attempted to kill him. [30] When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.

Barnabas stepped in to introduce Saul to the disciples as "the real thing." After being treated unfairly by the Hellenists and having his life endangered, the disciple say to him, "Go to Tarsus, take a rest. Just stay out of town until things cool down."

⁵ Perhaps spending their newly earned money!

ACTS 9:31 - Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.

You see what just happened there? The church grew. How? Well, 1st the church was edified, then it was multiplied. When the question is asked “How do you build a church,” the answer is not what church growth material we should use. The answer is what type of people should the church consist of? Answer: people who are “***walking in the fear of the Lord.***” Turn over to the next chapter.

IV. Acts 10:34-35

We go from Saul to Peter and he is preaching a message in the characteristic of God for showing no partiality to those he offers salvation to. Peter had just had the vision of the animals on the sheet – thus pronouncing to him the unity of Jews and Gentles within the context of the church. Peter’s opening words in his sermon were this:

ACTS 10:34-35 – [34] Then Peter opened his mouth and said: ‘In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. [35] But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.

Who is acceptable to God? Those who are righteous and those who fear God. In other words, he looks for right behavior – “***righteousness***” – and right postures – “***whoever fears Him***” – before God. God doesn’t accept professing believers who do not fear Him. While salvation does not discriminate, that never means you can pray some magical prayer and then behave how you want. Lordship salvation is living the way He wants, demands and deserves. And He deserves our fear.

V. Acts 13:13-16, 26, 42

Chapter 13 begins the section of Acts where the focus turns from Peter to Paul. And down in vs. 13, Paul is off on his 1st Missionary Journey.

ACTS 13:13-15 – [13] Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem. [14] But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. [15] And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, ‘Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.’

In other words, they invite Paul to preach in the synagogue. This would be one of the 1st sermons on Paul’s 1st missionary journey. What would he have to say? Look at the next verse.

ACTS 13:16, 26 – [13] Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, ‘Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: ... [26] Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to you the word of this salvation has been sent.’

How did he refer to the church? As those “***who fear God.***” He didn’t refer to them as Christians or Antioch Bible Church members. He called them “***you who fear God.***” He is addressing such people. You know what these people do? You want to know how to identify people who fear God? Luke describes at the end of this chapter in vs. 42.

ACTS 13:42 - So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath.

One of the best compliments a preacher can receive is something to the effect, “Pastor, I really appreciated what you taught. I want to let you know I am coming back for more!” They could not get enough of God and His word. You get that? God-fearers don’t run from God and hide; they run to Him and commune.

VI. Acts 19:11-18

Paul was doing some extraordinary things in Ephesus. In fact, he was now in the middle of his 3rd Missionary Journey and he had been in this city for 2 years (Eph 2:10).

ACTS 19:11-15 – [11] Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, [12] so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them. [13] Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, ‘We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches.’ [14] Also there were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so.

[15] And the evil spirit answered and said, ‘Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?’

Hopefully, you see what is going on here. Paul had real miraculous power given to him by God Himself. And as we see several times in the Book of Acts, a group of false teachers gets jealous and tries to steal the glory for themselves using magic.

When they came upon a demon possessed man, they tried to exorcise it; they tried to remove it from the individual. The demon’s response was, “Hey, who are you? I know who Jesus and Paul are, but I have no idea who you are.” Keep reading.

ACTS 19:16-18 – [16] Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. [17] This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was

magnified. [18] And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds.

They were afraid not only of what they witnessed but the One behind this miraculous event. And the fear led to a radical change in those who saw it happen. John MacArthur comments,

“You know what they said, ‘The Name of the Lord Jesus, don't mess with that name! Don't use that name with a trifle! Don't use it in vain! Don't play around with that name!’ Even the unsaved began to recognize something stupendous about the Name of Jesus. That's exactly what God wanted. What a name! The Name at which every knee should bow.”⁶

There are some other verses worth mentioning as well regarding the fear of God in the N.T.

VII. Other Passages in the N.T.

A. Ephesians 5:21

As Paul is beginning to close his epistle to the church, Paul commands all believers to be filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18). In vs. 19-21, he explains how: by singing to one another (vs. 19), by giving thanks (vs. 20) and then he says by “*submitting to one another in the fear of God*” (vs. 21). This reverence for God serves as part of our foundation towards our submission to His Lordship. You cannot call Him Lord and not fear God.

B. Hebrews 11:7

This is the well-known “Chapter of Faith,” where the writer of Hebrews discusses O.T. saints and examines the examples of great faith. We get an example in the life of Noah whose fear of God led him to obey the Lord at any cost. Vs. 7 reads, “*By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.*”

Put this in the historical context. Noah was told to build this massive ship – roughly the size of modern-day cruise ships – in the middle of the desert because God told him it would flood even though this had never happened before. Up to this point, a mist watered the earth; there was a canopy around the globe. It was a tropical environment and there were no seasons. There were no ice caps on poles; it was one universal climate. That's why you find dinosaurs remains on the upper edges of the Arctic Circle with tropical vegetation in their stomachs.

And this would not become some local flood but it would be a universal flood so there would be no mountaintop to hide on anywhere. And during the entire building process, he endured the persecutions and slander and mockings of all who disbelieved. No one but whom God chose would survive. Noah got these commands from God and acted upon them. By the way, Noah

⁶ “Exorcism: True or False?,” http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/1772_Exorcism--True-or-False--Part-2.

built it 500 miles from the nearest ocean, 1000x times too big for his own family, and when he got it finished he filled it with animals!

There was no disobedience and no questioning and no doubting of God's wisdom. Out of His reverence for who God is, He did exactly what God told him. That is fearing God – absolute obedience no matter the consequence or the unnatural command that seems to be given. Fear of God drove Him to obey God without conditions.

C. Hebrews 12:28-29

Here the author writes, *“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire.”*

Here we see very clearly God demands our fear of Him for 2 reasons: (1) He is the Lord of the kingdom we have inherited and (2) He is *“a consuming fire.”* Do what He says or you will see what this *“consuming fire”* really means in eternity.

D. I Peter 2:17

Peter is telling the church how to submit to the government. In vs. 17, Peter writes, *“Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.”* Fearing God restrains us from violating the other commands mentioned here – dishonoring others, hating our brothers and failing to honor our political leaders.

E. Revelation 11:16-18

This fearing of God does not somehow disappear when we arrive in heaven. When John gets a peak into heaven, this is what he records, *“And the twenty-four elders who sat before God on their thrones fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: ‘We give You thanks, O Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was and who is to come, because You have taken Your great power and reigned. The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, and those who fear Your name, small and great, and should destroy those who destroy the earth.’”*

F. Revelation 15:3-4

Again, we get a glimpse into heaven and a song being sung– *“They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying: ‘Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints! Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, for Your judgments have been manifested.’”* Later in Revelation 19:5, these saints and angels are praised for fearing God.

The Prime Minister of England from 1868-1894 W.E. Gladstone was atop his position in the government during one of the highest of times in the British Empire. The sun never set on the British Empire (because of colonization). A student approached him when he was on campus at Christ Church in England and asked, “Sir, are we to understand that you have no anxieties for the future? Are there no adverse signs?”

His could have been as easily said in 2011 as it was some 200 years ago. He said, “Yes, there is one thing that frightens me. I fear that the fear of God seems to be dying out in the minds of men.”

CONCLUSION

If John Calvin is right that all wickedness flows from a disregard of God or a lack of fearing Him, then we need to ask the question, “How do I keep myself in the fear of God? How do we cultivate this fear of God?”

- 1. By reading and mediating on the Word of God.** Something I wish this was still practiced today is recorded for us in Deuteronomy 17. Here is what God commanded of each king that ascended to his throne.

“Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book (The idea would be that by this he would learn the Law even better through this exercise.), from the one before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, (Here comes another purpose for this exercise.) that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren, that he may not turn aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left, and that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children in the midst of Israel” (Deut 17:18-20).

You see the connection here with fearing Him and one’s relationship to the Word? Those who fear God know His word and they know it well. They don’t have a causal understanding of it or barely read it every now and then. They know it like a king is to know the laws he enforces.

Again, we see this in Deuteronomy 31:9-13 – *“So Moses wrote this law and delivered it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, saying: ‘At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the LORD your God and carefully observe all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess.’”*

2. **By having the right “vision” of who Christ is.** What are we to see of Christ? Let the Apostle John remind us. He writes, *“Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength”* (Rev 1:12-16). Lawson writes,

“How did John respond to what he saw? Yawn? High-five Jesus? Snuggle up to Him? Hardly! In absolute dread, the awestruck apostle collapsed at His nail-pierced feet as though he were a dead man. Remember, this is the same John who had been with the Lord during His earthly ministry and had rested his head upon his bosom in the upper room! Yes this vision of the risen, reigning Christ cause John to fall on his face. John was seized with fear because he the Lord as he really is.”⁷

If you want to know how to fear God, see Jesus as John saw Him.

3. **By working out your salvation.** In one of the most inspiring verses I know of in all of Scripture, Paul commands us, *“... Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure”* (Phil 2:12-13). This is a never-let up commitment to obedience. It does not mean salvation is by works, but it means until we breathe our last breath we are working on obeying Him because it is what one who abides in Him does.
4. **By studying the character of God.** People don’t often fear God because they simply don’t know Him. Pick up a good theology proper work and shower your meditations with it.

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⁷ *Made In Our Image*, pgs. 200-201.

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