Section: Doctrine of God

**TEACHING NOTES**

**Q17. What does it mean to fear God?**

A: For the saved, fearing God is not a fear of His wrath; rather, it is an awe—a reverence—for the holiness and majesty of God. It is also a humbleness and reasonable trembling towards God’s seriousness and power.

**Proverbs 14:27** The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life,

that one may turn away from the snares of death.

**Proverbs 10:27** The fear of the Lord prolongs life,

but the years of the wicked will be short.

**Proverbs 22:4** The reward for humility and fear of the Lord

is riches and honor and life.

PRAY…

The fear of the Lord is a good thing! The bible never speaks of the fear of God in negative terms. To the contrary, it is a phrase that describes a proper response to who God is. It’s not a phrase that we use much in our day but it is one that we need to understand and practice and even delight in. There are so many blessings that come from the fear of God. So let’s jump in to question 17 of the WOTC.

**What does it mean to fear God?** For the saved, fearing God is not a fear of His wrath, rather it is an awe- a reverence- for the holiness and majesty of God. It is also a humbleness and reasonable trembling towards God’s seriousness and power.

FOR THE SAVED

When the Bible speaks of the Fear of God or the fear of the Lord, it has a particular theological meaning. It is a phrase that only applies to the saved and is only possible by the saved. It does not mean afraid of God.

Theologian John Gill says, the fear of God “is not meant a fear of God's wrath, of hell and damnation; nor a fearful distrust of his presence, power, providence, and grace; much less an hypocritical fear; but a reverential affection for God, and which is peculiar to the children of God, which springs from a sense of divine goodness, is attended with holiness of heart and life, is consistent with faith, even full assurance of it, and with spiritual joy in its highest degree; it stands opposed to pride and haughtiness, and is a blessing of the covenant of grace: now this is not to be found in unregenerate men, for this springs from grace, and not nature, and is only implanted in the heart in conversion; it appears from the whole life and conversation of unconverted men, that the fear of God is not in their hearts, nor before their eyes.”

Those who aren’t saved **should** fear God *properly*, but they don’t. God’s word highlights this in Romans 3. Speaking of the unregenerate (those without saving faith in Christ alone) Romans 3 says their deadness in sin is marked by the fact that, “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Romans 3:18).

**Psalm 14:1** The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."

That is the condition of the unsaved. You may know non-Christians who believe in God but in their hearts they say there is no God. They may say they believe in His existence but they live in willful ignorance of Him. In their heart they desire what is contrary to God and His will, so they think and live as though His existence doesn’t matter. They have no fear of God.

It is impossible for the unbeliever to do anything that pleases God and the fear of God is pleasing to Him. The phrase “fear of God” is a strange way to describe righteousness but that is the way the Bible speaks about it.

The book of Proverbs constantly equates the fear of God with righteousness. It describes the differences between those who fear God and those who don’t; the righteous way to live versus the foolish or unrighteous way of living.

While unbelievers don’t fear God rightly, we can look back through history and see that many different cultures and false religions have been governed by a superstitious kind of fear of what they generally perceive of as a very powerful deity. Every known religion that has ever been invented by man is an attempt to appease their perceived god through some kind of human effort. During the Dark Ages, the Roman Catholic church was able to wield a significant amount of power over people and even kings and governments, in large part due to preying on people’s superstitious fear of a made up god. This was really a dreadful fear that was rooted, not in the biblical understanding of God’s true character and nature, but rather in the thought that God was an unstable, angry deity who needed to be appeased by man’s efforts or He might blow up in anger at any moment and bring some kind of ruin or misery to their already difficult lives.

This kind of unbiblical dread does not honor God in its aim but it does still glorify God in the display of the terror of His righteous wrath towards sin. It also serves in some degree to promote a level of civil obedience that can keep society from being as bad as it could be. While this is not a proper fear of God, there can be a temporary good that comes from a dreadful fear of God’s wrath. It can be the means God uses to maintain a level of civility in society, a way of providing for human flourishing. It can also be the means God uses to bring sinners to repentance at His appointed time, when the gospel is proclaimed to them and the Holy Spirit gives them ears to hear the good news. The fear of punishment by God, or the fear of His wrath, is the appropriate response of those who are in rebellion against God, for those who are His enemies.

In other words, the unsaved person who has a dreadful fear of the wrath of God due them because of their guilt and sin is in a better place than the person who does not. The person who fears God’s wrath is at least in a position to be concerned with the reality of God’s wrath due their sin.

This does not in any way place them in a better standing before God or earn them any kind of good credit with God but it can help them better understand the gospel when it is presented. Too much of what is passed off as evangelism is an attempt to make people feel better about the natural shame and consequence of their sin rather than helping them to see how much more offensive it is to a holy God than it is to them. They want to remove the offense of the gospel by minimizing the wrath of God against their sin and the fact that they are enemies of God while they remain in their sin and unbelief. We must not shy away from letting sinners feel the full weight of their true condition before God. Only those who are able to see their true condition as sinners against a holy God will ever be in a position to humbly embrace the good news of the gospel.

Prior to his conversion, the famous reformer Martin Luther was a monk who lived in dreadful fear of God’s wrath every day. The standard of holiness and perfection that he saw in God’s word was a crushing weight that he knew he could never achieve. He would spend hours in the confessional repenting of every sin he could think of. He went to extreme measures of asceticism – punishing himself in drastic ways. He would starve himself and sleep on the cold floor with no blankets in an effort to pay penance for his sin.

This fear of God’s wrath did not bring about any peace or worship in Martin Luther. His fear of God did not come from a heart of love for God and His holiness. He went so far in one of his writings to say that at times he hated God.

His dread of God’s wrath lead to a sinful attempt by him to earn God’s favor through his own efforts, but by God’s grace his eyes were eventually opened to see in scripture that salvation and reconciliation to the one true God is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Martin Luther was right to believe that he deserved God’s wrath, and he was correct in believing that he was hopeless to ever achieve the level of perfection required by God’s perfect holiness. It was this right view of God’s holiness in contrast to his own sinfulness that made the good news of the gospel so wonderful to him. He did not lose his fear of God after he was set free from the dread of God’s wrath. His fear of God was transformed, now marked by loving worship and a devotion to the true knowledge of God found in scripture and this caused him to risk his life opposing the false teaching of the Pope and the Roman Catholic church. When he was put on trial and commanded to recant, his unwillingness to do so was grounded in the fact that he feared God more than he feared man.

Many of the Martyrs of the Christian faith clung to the words of Jesus in :

**Matthew 10:28** “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Their fear of God was grounded in their faith that nothing was more dreadful than being separated from the love of God. If they had dreaded God’s wrath then they would have been terrified to face Him and would therefore have feared death. Fearing the One who can destroy both body and soul in Hell is not the same thing as being afraid that He will destroy my body and soul in Hell.

You cannot know God in a saving way if you do not fear Him. It is possible to be afraid of God’s wrath or punishment and not be saved, but it is not possible to be saved without a proper fear of God’s wrath. I am not contradicting our definition which clearly states that for the saved the fear of God is not a fear of His wrath. What I mean is that there is a truth to the reality of God’s wrath against sin that every sinner must see as God’s righteous and holy judgment towards them before they can truly repent. The fear of wrath for the now saved is no longer about facing God’s wrath, rather it’s a respect for the reality of God’s wrath toward sin.

If you have your Bible’s please turn with me to Deuteronomy 5:23-29. While you are turning there, I’m going to read a short passage in Exodus to give you the context for what we will read in Deuteronomy 5:23-29.This is taking place at Mount Sinai when God came and spoke to Moses in a thick cloud before all the people of Israel.

**Exodus 20:18-20** Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off 19 and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." 20 Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin."

Now this is the scene Moses is referring back to in our Deuteronomy passage.

**Deuteronomy 5:23-29** And as soon as you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes, and your elders. 24 And you said, 'Behold, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire. This day we have seen God speak with man, and man still live. 25 Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, we shall die. 26 For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire as we have, and has still lived? 27 Go near and hear all that the Lord our God will say, and speak to us all that the Lord our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it. '

28 "And the Lord heard your words, when you spoke to me. And the Lord said to me, 'I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you. They are right in all that they have spoken. 29 Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!

God said… They are right in all that they have spoken. They were right to fear God as they did. They were right to cry out for a mediator. They were right to say that they would die if they drew near to this great fire of God’s holy presence. God says “Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments”.

They were overwhelmed by the awesome display of God’s presence and showed great reverence and awe. God was pleased by their humility in that moment.

They honored God in that moment by asking for a mediator. They were fulfilling God’s purpose for the Old Covenant nation of Israel to be a shadow and a type of what was to come in the New Covenant when we would have Christ as our perfect and final mediator. They were acknowledging their unworthiness to stand in the presence of God and yet they were also asking for a mediator so they could know and do His will.

NOT A FEAR OF HIS WRATH

When our answer says that the fear of God for the saved is not a fear of His wrath, see that we do not mean the wrath of God is not to be feared in any way. We have already seen that it is foolish not to fear the wrath of God. When we say that the fear of God for the saved is not a fear of His wrath, we mean that the fear of God’s wrath for the saved does not result in us being afraid that God’s wrath is directed toward us. We who have trusted in Christ for our righteousness and salvation have no reason to be afraid of God. God is perfect and unchanging. He is not subject to mood swings the way we as creatures are. He does not change His mind. What He has said He will do. So we have no reason to be afraid of God the way we might be of human authority.

We the saved are not stuck in a constant state of fear that God’s wrath is ready to smite us with the next wrong move.

The difference between the fear of God’s wrath for the saved and the unsaved is the Gospel.

The gospel is the good news that Jesus has taken on all of the wrath due to those who trust in Him and keep His commandments – not as a way to earn His favor, but as a response to the favor He has already shown us. Jesus paid it ALL – that’s why He said “it is finished”.

The gospel gives us a right understanding of God’s wrath. The gospel shows us that the wrath of God towards sin will not be set aside. God will not change His mind about that which he hates. His character is constant and unchanging and His wrath toward sin is good and righteous. If He did not have a perfect and serious hatred of sin He would not be good and righteous.

The gospel is the good news that the wrath of God due the elect has been propitiated in Christ. The great contemporary hymn “In Christ Alone” says it beautifully – “and on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied.”

The wrath that we deserve for our sin is not something the saved need to fear because it was completely absorbed by Christ on the cross. More than anything else, what Christ has saved us from is the wrath of God.

This gospel truth gives us an incredibly vivid display of how God’s wrath is certainly something to be feared by those it’s aimed at, yet it is simultaneously comforting for those who have put their trust in Christ. God’s wrath is real and right, and it’s been poured out on Jesus for those who trust in Christ alone. This dual effect of the gospel gives us a right awe/reverence for the holiness and majesty of God and motivates us to live lives that are pleasing to God. It also frees us from being paralyzed in fear for the fact that we deserve God’s wrath and could never do anything to escape it, by showing us that God has done for us what we could never do for ourselves, to make holy that which is not holy, and that by grace alone – not by anything that we have done or ever could do.

Rightly knowing of God’s wrath is a good thing that helps the believer return to repentance and faith when we have sinned or are tempted to sin. It is a humble reverence and awe for who God is and what He has done to pay for our sin. Our sin should cause us to be reminded of God’s wrath and hatred of sin, and then drive us back in to the open arms of Christ. Repentance and faith, repentance and faith..seeing and believing that our sin is deserving of God’s wrath, and then being moved by the terrible thought of that to fix our eyes back on Christ, loving and trusting Him for all that He has accomplished for us.

It is only by faith in the substitutionary, atoning work of Christ that we are able to worship and adore God, free from the constant drear and terror of God’s wrath that will visit all those who reject Him.

Awe and Reverence for the holiness and majesty of God

So…let’s continue unpacking our answer. For the saved, fearing God is not a fear of His wrath, rather it is an awe- a reverence- for the holiness and majesty of God.

We live in a culture that does not fear God. There are fools who outright deny the existence of God. They do not fear Him because they have suppressed the truth that He exists. When that worldview is taken to its full end, society will disintegrate into chaos, anarchy, and ultimately destruction, because it will be every man for himself. There will be no moral restraint because without God there is no basis for morality. This kind of irreverence for God is pretty obvious.

But, there is another section of our society that acknowledges God and in many cases even claims to be Christian, but they do not exercise the awe and reverence His holiness demands.

**Hebrews 12:28-29** Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.

These others worship a god of their own making, by crafting a god in their minds who is NOT a consuming fire. They worship a false god. They pick and choose the attributes of God that fit their own desires. They define love as anything and everything that makes them feel happy or absent of any standard, consequence, or guilt. They start with the idea that love is something properly and universally defined and understood by all men, and then they place that definition over the top of everything that God’s word says about love. So when John says that God is love, they apply ***their*** definition of love to God. Now, when they read that God is a consuming fire, that God is wrath, that God is just, that God is holy, they find ways to subjugate these things to their definition of what is loving. So they redefine all of these things because they cannot see how God can be both love and wrath - mercy and justice.

Now… it is good and right and God-honoring for us to stand back and focus on the love and mercy of God, and celebrate with joy and laughter, and dancing. But if that is the only way we ever approach God, not only are we missing out on the overwhelming blessing of knowing Him more fully, but we are also in danger of being deceived because we have not seen enough of God’s demand for holiness for us to truly repent and worship Him fully and rightly.

We need to maintain a full view of God’s character at all times, being careful not to become flippant or cavalier in our worship of Him.

We see an example of how the holiness of God should affect our worship in:

**Isaiah 6:1-5** In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And I said:"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

When Isaiah was brought before the throne of God into the presence of His holiness, he cried out woe is me! He was instantly aware of how far short he fell of God’s glory. He said “I am lost”. Some translations say “I am undone”. Isaiah was not able to gaze at the perfection of God’s holiness without it un-doing him. He knew that the filth of his sin could not abide in the presence of God. This godly fear was not a self-centered focus on self preservation but more of an overwhelming awareness of the holiness of God. It was a humble acknowledgment of the truth that our sin- any sin- does not belong in the presence of a perfect and holy God.

Over and over again in scripture we see that fear is the most common response when someone has close contact with the power or presence of God.

Mark 4 tells the story of the disciples crossing the sea of Galilee when a storm arose and they thought they were going to perish. They woke Jesus and he commanded the sea to be still. Then:

**Mark 4:41** And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

They were more afraid after the storm was calmed then they were when it was raging. Why? Because when the storm was raging they thought that it was the most dangerous thing threatening them but they suddenly became very aware that there was someone in the boat with them who was much more dangerous. He didn’t even struggle with the storm, He rebuked it with a word and it obeyed. They realized that they were in the presence of God. They were immediately aware of the fact that they were sinners in the presence of the Holy God.

The things that scare us are usually things that we consider to be evil, and we think it right that we should be delivered from them. When we encounter the holiness of God, the fear that overtakes us is the horrifying awareness of our defilement in the presence of His perfect purity. We are humbled, made aware of our infinite unworthiness in light of His perfect holiness and majesty.

This is a common experience when we see the majesty of God in creation.

Several years ago I had the opportunity to hike to the peak of Half Dome in Yosemite. I don’t think that I am afraid of heights, I actually am disposed towards being more of a thrill seeker, but when I reached the top of that mountain and started walking toward the edge, I suddenly became paralyzed with fear. I could not bring myself to walk all the way to the edge. I was cautiously trying to peek over the edge while constantly making sure there was good footing, that the wind was not blowing too hard, that no one was near enough to spook me, etc…Finally, because I just didn’t trust myself to not slip or trip lose my balance, I laid prostrate on the rock and did an army crawl to the edge so that I could look all the way over. As I hung my head over the side and looked down at the shear face of the mountain and the great heights above the valley floor it was absolutely glorious. I was in awe.

Part of what captivated me was the potential danger, the power of the mountain to destroy me if I did not treat it with the respect that it was due. But another part of me was laying on the mountain, and drawing a sense of peace and safety from it as long as I was clinging to it. The same mountain that had the power to destroy me was also keeping me safe and giving me a sense of security. As I layed there taking in that majestic view I could not help but think of my insignificance in comparison to all that I was seeing. Then I thought about how much more amazing is the God who spoke it all into existence.

That’s how the fear of God works. It is when we have a right view of our place in the world; that in and of ourselves we are nothing but a mist that vanishes, here today and gone tomorrow.

That leads us to the next part of our answer.

Humility

It says that the fear of God

“is also a humbleness and reasonable trembling towards God’s seriousness and power.”

This humbleness is a true knowledge of our place before God. It’s that reminder we get when we see a glimpse of the majesty of God’s glory. It’s the gospel reminder that we are saved by grace alone - that we have received an undeserved gift from an unobligated giver.

We will never arrive at a place where we are equals with the one who saved us. We never get to the place where we think that we could be holy on our own, without the ongoing and sustaining grace of God.

What is this reasonable trembling? It is the natural consequence of being humbled. It is a physical response to an overwhelming revelation. It’s similar to when you get goose bumps from the thought or sight of something glorious. It happens naturally in response to an experience.

We’re talking about a reasonable trembling, or an appropriate trembling. Remember the response by the people of Israel…

**Exodus 20:18** Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off

It is reasonable and appropriate to tremble in the presence of God. The reasonableness of it is due to God’s seriousness and power.

**Philippians 2:12** Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling

**Psalm 96:9** Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!

Do you tremble before the Lord or have you become too comfortable with the majesty and holiness of God? Is your worship of God governed by a great awe and respect, with humility and reasonable trembling?

How do we maintain a right fear of God? The simple answer is that we have to keep Him in view. We have to keep our eyes fixed on Him throughout our day. We also have to cultivate right thoughts about who God is. We have to guard our thoughts from allowing our thoughts of God to be our own ideas and not truth. That’s one of the primary functions of the local church, to keep our thoughts about God in line with the truth of what He has revealed of Himself in His word.

What are you doing to cultivate a growing knowledge of God? Coming to church on Sunday is great, coming to midweek is great, but if those few hours are the only time you are focusing your attention on knowing more about God you will likely struggle to maintain a right fear of God throughout your week.

In closing I want to consider three specific ways that the fear of God benefits us. There are much more than three but these are the three that I chose to highlight.

1. It makes us wise

**Proverbs 9:10** The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,

and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

Simply *knowing* what the Bible means and understanding the teachings of scripture are not the end goal of our efforts, they are a means to a greater end. That greater end is to know God- not just know about Him, but know Him intimately.

Wisdom is not just knowing lots of things or having the cognitive ability to remember and quote what you have learned. There are plenty of educated fools in this world including many of us in this room prior to God’s grace. Wisdom is not just knowing the correct answer to the question, it’s the conviction that the correct answer is true and knowing how it applies to life and living accordingly. It is the application of knowledge and truth.

It has been said that wisdom is the skill for living. That’s a helpful way to think of it, as a skill. I really enjoy playing the game of golf and have tried hard to learn how to play better. I’ve watched lots of videos and have even taken lessons. The thing that has frustrated me more than anything is that it doesn’t matter how much I know about how to swing a golf club, actually being able to hit the ball far and straight is a matter of skill, much more than knowledge. It certainly helps to know what you’re supposed to do, but being skillfull only comes from consistent and committed practice. I must apply what I know and put it into action. The skill will only come when I have consistently applied the knowledge through practice. So the skill or wisdom to play well comes from practicing but I can never let go of the knowledge. I have to constantly measure the outcome of my practice to what I know. If I don’t keep what I know in view, I can easily begin to practice what is not correct.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, the starting point for becoming skillful at living. So fearing God has to do with how we live, even more than how we think. YES, we must think right before we can live right, but the emphasis is on the application of knowledge. A right fear of God compels us to obey His commands. We know Him more intimately as we exercise our faith in Him by doing what he has told us to do even when we are tempted to think our way would be better. That is true wisdom - doing what God says even when my flesh or my personal experience tells me otherwise.

1. It humbles us

It is not possible for us to have a right fear of God and be governed by pride at the same time. We might waffle between those two at times but we won’t stay there.

I can’t be aware of my own unworthiness of the incredible mercy of God towards me and simultaneously stand in judgment with un-forgiveness toward my neighbor. In the fear of God my judgment of others is balanced by my knowledge of my own sin and God’s mercy. It makes me careful not to judge others by a different standard than the one God judges me by.

The fear of the Lord causes me to be more concerned about my own sin than the sins of others. It also makes me a more righteous judge of others’ sin. When a brother or sister is in sin, the fear of God will help me to judge righteously. I won’t be motivated by my own pride or fear of man but by a desire to honor God and see Him glorified.

1. It emboldens us

When we have a right fear of God we will not fear anything else, not poverty, not ridicule, not failure, not hatred, not cancer, not death, and not even the wrath of God.

We won’t be intimated or held back from whole heartedly worshipping Christ due to fear of man. What others think of me means nothing in light of knowing God.

The fear of God will embolden you to worship and serve Him unto death just as the saints who have gone before us. God is worthy of our fear, our confidence, and our unwavering allegiance. Amen?

The fear of God for we who are saved is a great comfort. We know that the most awesome and dreadful power in the universe loves us and is on our side and that His power is at work in us to bring us to our final salvation.

Let’s close with the words of King Solomon as he closes the Book of Ecclesiastes:

**Ecclesiastes 12:13** The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

Let’s pray

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