

“YIR’ ATH YAHWEH”

*Luke 1:46-50, Psalms 2:11, 76 & 78, 130:4, Isaiah 8:12b - 13, II Timothy 1:7,
II Corinthians 5:10 & 11*

The best way to describe the whole of Old Testament religion is by the phrase --Yir’ath Yahweh-- “the fear of the Lord” --it is man’s response to the awesome experience of the holy--the other world breaking into this one. When the inescapable God forces His way into man’s tent--breaks into man’s mind--disrupts his history, his neatly selfish plans--and glares at him and shouts at him-- “thou shalt not” or “thou shalt” --this revelation, this *theophany*, this sudden insight or sightfulness, this vision of the other side of reality, causes the man--in Old Testament terms-- to “tremble”-- “quake” -- “shake” --“quiver” “shudder”-- “stagger” -- “reel” -- “writhe”, a state we refined Presbyterians would never dream of getting in -- short of acute alcoholism--and yet in our surface primness maybe we have lost a great deal in never being able to say with Jacob, “How awesome is this place!” It is quite likely that we imagine ourselves on too intimate--too friendly a basis with the Almighty--as though God were our benevolent grandpa-pa--easily manipulated by us to fit our whims. Where today the *mysterium tremendum* in the worship of say, a typical Presbyterian church? Where is awe before Holy God here? God as present, God as judging, down to Hell or up to Heaven in an hour. Who can call our religion Yir’ath Yahweh? “The fear of the Lord?” Or is our morning in church a sort of mild moralizing by minister and members, both a bunch of Biblical dummies who don’t really believe one another when they mumble--who may get a bit claustrophobic around each other (“get me out of here”), but never felt Yir’ath Yahweh, “the fear of God”? For example if Adam were in our organized Eden called “Church”, would he be afraid today because of his disobedience--or would he swagger now and brag about it? Or would Sarah be frightened nowadays because she giggled at God or would she just giggle on? Would Abimelech still tremble because of his disobedience? (If he did--would we probably think he was, like me, diabetic?) Would Moses still be afraid of God’s anger because his people worshipped the solid gold Cadillac (I mean calf) or would he say in his prayers every night -- “be good to my parishioners, Lord, because they have been so sweet to me!” Would the 76th and 78th psalmist be seized with terror in any upper middle class, upper cultured church today because of the certainty of punishment for their sins? Do we fail to answer these questions because we’re afraid, not of God, but of each other? Then maybe we better salute each other as we leave and say: “Well, I’ll see you in hell...” and if the answer is “Hell, you will” it’s probably right.

But Yir'ath Yahweh-- "the fear of the Lord" in the Old Testament is not negative. That is not only makes one aware of one's sin--but also aware of the chance of salvation--and not a slim chance either. The fear of God is in seeing Him not only as holy--but as merciful and forgiving--that the Creator is so concerned for His creatures that He enters into covenant with them in an act of saving grace. So, old Jacob not only says - "How awesome is this place!" --but also-- "Why this is the very gate of heaven."

So Moses is in fear at the burning bush -- but exalts to learn the name of deity and to discover His saving purpose.

There is -- in the Old Testament, therefore, no contradiction between the fear of God and faith in Him--in fact holy awe and joy go together --as in Psalm 2:11: "Serve Yahweh (God) with fear, and rejoice with trembling." Acceptance of His salvation-- his forgiveness--when one knows one is utterly unworthy of it --is not to go strutting about in pride--but to tremble in humility-- "There is forgiveness with Thee, that thou mayest be feared." (Psalm 130:4) Indeed--the absolute love of God demanded in the Shema-- "thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all" --demands total surrender -- and total surrender of the ego to the will of God is such a fearful thing. How many of us do it? But a marvelous thing -- when one does surrender one's self --one's opinions -- one's attitudes -- one's feelings--as well as one's behavior--one's whole life to the God in fear--then one need not be afraid of anything or anyone else in this whole treacherous world or in the world to come. Listen to this passage from Isaiah (8:12b - 13): "Do not fear what other men fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord of host, Him you shall regard as holy; let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread." Thus, you see--you shall fear no man--no man can intimidate you--make you cower--neither by his intelligence, or his wealth, or his physical strength--no man! Never again--not ever! When one fears God only, there is a saving grace...

And what is true of "the fear of God" in the Old Testament remains true in the new. The perfect love of Christ, says Isaiah 4:17 - 18, casts out fear--but only of the world--so that the Christian (says Paul in II Timothy 1:7) is no timid soul -- but possessed of power and self-control, yet there remains that type of fear all New Testament folk felt when they witnessed the work of God in Jesus Christ.

The disciples were never presumptuous in their friendship--never brashly self confident and "chummy" with the Master--for he was just that--"Master", "Lord"--Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God"--"My Lord and my God!" Not "buddy, buddy". When

He stilled the storm--worldly fear disappeared, yes, but a holy awe of this man-God took its place. When He healed the sick, raised the dead--the bystanders knew "God has visited His people"--the other world has intruded itself upon this one--and there is fearful joy--for God has put His hands into their personal history. At His resurrection--the women "departed quickly....with fear and great joy."

One is thus in error to suppose that the New Testament has substituted for the Old Testament "fear of God" the "love of God"---not a bit of it. If you mean the New substitutes a benevolent nincompoop who lets us get away with anything--for the merciful judge of the Old. No, Luke uses as a synonym for believers: "Those who fear God" (Luke 1:50)--Could that be a synonym for us Presbyterians? "Those who fear God." The Acts says the early church grew in strength and numbers because its members were found "walking in the fear of the Lord". What about us?

As Paul wrote in Second Corinthians 5:10 & 11: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that everyone may receive the things done in his body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad. Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord we persuade men....."

Dread of the Day of Yahweh--of Christ's second coming in judgment--means little to us--but faith in it would answer many of our moral dilemmas, would it not?