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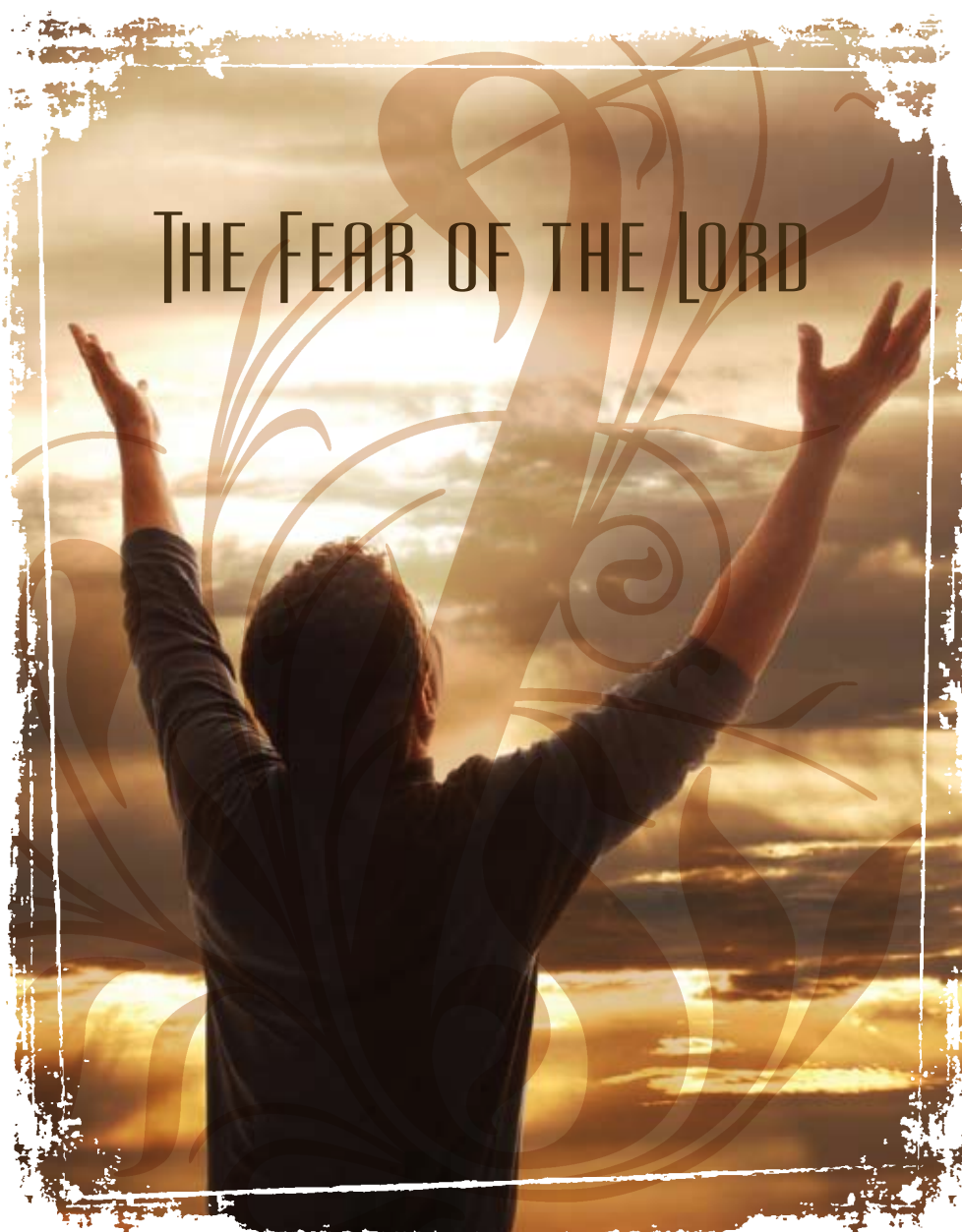
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# BRIDGES FOR PEACE

## *Israel Teaching Letter*

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## THE FEAR OF THE LORD

*"Oh, fear the LORD, you His saints! There is no want to those who fear Him. The young lions lack and suffer hunger; but those who seek the LORD shall not lack any good thing." PSALM 34:9-10*



The fear of the Lord is a complex concept that occupies a unique prevalence in both the Old and New Testaments. Christian commentators and Jewish sages have spoken of this idea perhaps more than any other, clearly identifying it as a fundamental component of a true relationship with the Almighty One. Charles Spurgeon spoke of it as the centrality of the Christian experience. The *Talmud* (rabbinic commentary on Jewish tradition and the Hebrew Scriptures) says, “A man who possesses learning without fear of the Lord is like the man who has been entrusted with the keys of an inner court but not with the keys of the outer court; how is he to enter?” If we are to love the Lord as He deserves to be loved and sanctify His name through our lives, a careful look at what the Bible and the sages say about the fear of the Lord is certainly in order.

## A DEFINITION

Our walk with the Lord is not merely an intellectual exercise. Without fear of God, there is no knowledge of God. Someone may be well versed in Scripture and doctrine, yet, if he does not fear the Lord, then he does not know the Lord who wrote the Scriptures. It is only when our *hearts* are fully availed to God’s words and commands that we can understand the fear of the Lord and reside in His perfect plan for our lives.

Who is the Lord that we should fear Him? Jeremiah 10:6–7 says, “*LORD there is **no one** like You. You are great; Your name is great in power. Who should not fear You, King of the nations?*” (emphasis added). Many in the Christian Church have wrongly held the view that the need to have a fear of the Lord somehow ceased with the finished work of Yeshua (Jesus). They confuse the boldness that Yeshua gave believers to *come before* the throne (Heb. 4:16) with the fear towards the One that is *on* the throne.

The most common terms used in the Bible for “fearing” God are those related to the Hebrew word *yirah*. Its root also appears in rabbinic literature in such terms as “fearing God’s name” (*yirat HaShem*), “fearing heaven” (*yirat shamayim*), and “fearing sin” (*yirat cheit*). Although a direct translation into English is difficult, the word is usually understood through its usage to mean “awe.” There are Hebrew words that are specifically used to denote other types of fear such as terror, anxiety, dread, or loathing. But *yirah* can be compared to the feeling of being overwhelmed by a reality greater than oneself and greater than that encountered in ordinary life.

In Acts 10:34–35, Peter says, “*...In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.*” This biblical fear of the Lord is not to be seen, therefore, as the opposite of boldness before the throne of God. We are not called to be “quivering wrecks”

before Him. Rather we are to approach His throne with boldness and confidence, yet with a trembling awareness of the power and majesty of the One who sits upon the throne.

As Christians, our understanding of this concept comes to us through the Hebraic foundations of our faith. The fear of the Lord is such a critical concept that the Jewish sages have dedicated much teaching and writing to the topic. They tell us that when a person leaves this world, God asks him questions including:

1. Were you honest in business?
2. Did you study *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)?
3. Did you wait for the Messiah?

If a person has spent his life in faithful devotion to the Lord and can answer yes to all of His questions, he will then be asked, “Did you live in the fear of the Lord?” If the answer is no, he will be told that all of his previous answers are worthless. Without the fear of the Lord, there is no accomplishment, regardless of how righteous or significant it might have seemed.

## HOW SHOULD IT BE MANIFESTED?

2 Corinthians 7:1 says, “*Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.*” When a person is consumed by the fear of the Lord, his whole way of life is affected. This includes how he spends his time, his money, how he talks, the places he visits, the pleasures that he seeks, and the company that he keeps.

In Judaism, living in the fear of the Lord fills one with the awareness that we cannot escape from the presence of God. Every moment is spent in His company whether we are conscious of it or not. It is the realization of that ever-abiding presence that gives our existence on this earth meaning and lends great significance to the consequences of every choice we make. Judaism also teaches, however, that a correct experience of the fear of the Lord cannot be had without a corresponding awareness of His love. God loves us, the Bible says, with an unending, infinite love. As we stand in awe of the power and grandeur of God, the seeming insignificance of our finite nature is balanced by our recognition of His deep and passionate love for us.



“...YOUR PRAYERS  
AND YOUR ALMS  
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BEFORE GOD.”

ACTS 10:4

Acts 10:2 tells us about Cornelius, the Roman centurion. He was “*a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the [Jewish] people, and prayed to God always.*” The Lord so appreciated Cornelius’s God-fearing devotion to Him that He sent an angel who told him, “...Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God” (v. 4b).



That devotion and fear of God would have easily been seen in Cornelius's everyday life. Character traits such as faith, kindness, trust in the future and courage in the face of adversity are all considered by-products of the fear of God. Such a life as his would have been marked by an unflagging commitment to the will of the Lord. Cornelius would always have chosen to do the right thing, especially in adversity. His acts of charity were acceptable to the Lord because they were motivated by love and commitment, not self-interest or fear of consequence.

## PROMISED BLESSINGS

Psalm 103:11 says, *"For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His faithful love toward those who fear Him"* (Holman Christian Standard Bible, emphasis added). The psalmist goes on to say that the Lord deals compassionately with those who revere Him, distancing their sins from them as far as the east is from the west. God knows, the psalm says, that man is made of dust and has a natural tendency to be tempted by sin when it is close at hand. But for those who live in the fear of Him, weakness evokes compassion rather than judgment. God is moved to display His extraordinary goodness by keeping sin out of reach, almost as though it is personified as an enemy whom He will not permit to come close enough to inflict harm.

Psalm 128 also professes blessing for those who fear the Lord. Such people will always know great joy, experiencing such rewards as enjoying the results of one's labor, happiness, prosperity, a wife that can bear many children, and a happy family life. For the ancient Israelite, there could be no greater promise than that of the ability to work and earn one's own bread. The rabbis taught that in successful labor, honor was found for the worker. Protection from uncertain climatic conditions, invading enemies, and the birth of many children rounded out the promise of an ideal family existence: *"How happy is everyone who fears*

"HOW HAPPY IS EVERYONE  
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PSALM 128:1-2. HCSB



*the LORD, who walks in His ways! You will surely eat what your hands have worked for. You will be happy, and it will go well for you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house, your sons, like young olive trees around your table"* (vv.1-3, HCSB, emphasis added).

Throughout the rest of Scripture, there are dozens of references to the fear of the Lord and its benefits for those who walk in it. King Solomon declares that *"The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death"* (Prov. 14:27, emphasis added).

## HUMILITY IS THE KEY

*"By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches and honor and life"* (Prov. 22:4). Remember the Pharisee in Luke 18 who stood in the Temple and prayed to God in his pride, thanking Him that he was *"...not like other*



men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers or even as this tax collector” (v. 11). Conversely, the tax collector beat his breast saying, “...God, be merciful to me a sinner” (v. 13b). We are told that it was the tax collector that went back to his house justified rather than the man who was given to arrogance. “...For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (v. 14b).

The *Talmud* teaches that the first act of every king should be to have his own personal copy of *Torah* created that he will carry with him at all times. The purpose is to insure that he will keep things in perspective, including his own importance. The *Torah* will remind him that even though he is king, he is not the one in control. Humility, the sages say, is about perspective, walking in the constant awareness that without the mercy and compassion of the Lord, we have no power to achieve that which is of eternal significance.

If we truly fear the Lord, the goal of our lives will always be to please Him, displaying our love for Him by living lives of purity and righteousness. If we walk in true humility, we will cleave to our Heavenly Father, who is our strength and shield against all that our adversary might attack us with, and willingly surrender anything that would hinder such a relationship. Psalm 34:7 says, “The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them.”

## THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

*“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments. His praise endures forever” (Ps. 111:10).*

*“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7).*

*“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy one is understanding” (Prov. 9:10).*

In Proverbs 1, King Solomon exhorts us to follow wisdom with the idea that having the fear of the Lord will make us ready to receive. A wise saying states, “The further people drift from the Lord, the more foolish they become.” Man’s wisdom is not to be compared with God’s wisdom. “‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8–9).

Yet, the Lord desires to abundantly impart His wisdom to His people. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach and it will be given to him” (James 1:5). However, we must be ready to receive this wonderful gift. Therefore, unless our hearts are right with God, causing us to walk with Him in fear and humility, He is unable to entrust us with godly wisdom.

Throughout history, the rabbis have taught that the awe of God is the first step on the road to becoming wise. Living in the fear of the Lord leads to acceptance of His sovereignty and apprehension of His precepts. We have already examined a number of Scriptures wherein the Lord has promised many wonderful things to those who revere Him, so from that perspective alone, fearing Him would be an act of wisdom. But the *Talmud* reiterates that true fear of the Lord is outside the



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realm of self-interest. Knowledge of God and reverence for Him are necessary prerequisites for attaining intellectual understanding. It is only by faithfully obeying the Lord that one can gain an appreciation of one's responsibilities to God and to his fellow man. The one who adheres to God's precept out of love and awe will find that the spirit of the Lord will lead him into all knowledge and discernment.

## LOVE AND AWE IN TANDEM

The sages have taught that God reveals Himself to man through His various characteristics that are disclosed through action. Two of the most prominent are *chesed* (covenant love and kindness) and *gevurah* (strength and accountability). These, the rabbis say, are the two fundamental "actions" of God and invariably evoke reactions on the part of mankind. Those reactions are, the sages say, *ahavah* or love and *yirah* or fear of God. Because of His great love for us, God compassionately gives us all that we have. Yet, in His strength, He requires accountability and truth in return. As we contemplate His goodness and kindness, we are filled with love for Him and a desire to enter into deeper relationship. And as we encounter His *gevurah*, we recognize His sovereignty and are moved to humble surrender. Jewish tradition says that *ahavah* and *yirah* are the two wings on which the *Torah* soars through the heavens.



As we have seen, the Bible is awash with Scripture that declares that we are to fear the Lord. Both Jewish and Christian tradition is rife with references to the fear of the Lord, both clearly considering it a foundation stone necessary for the building of a true relationship with God. This indicates the high level of importance that we should place on this aspect of our own relationship with Him. If we approach His throne carelessly or irreverently, then we do so at our peril. We are called to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds and bodies, and at the same time, we are also called to fear Him. We are to live in joyful abandon, reveling in His love and care for us, and yet we are to bow in humble submission to his sovereignty. We are to embrace the freedom that comes from relationship with the God of the Universe while accepting the parameters that such a relationship places around our lives.

WE ARE CALLED TO LOVE THE LORD OUR GOD WITH ALL  
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Twelfth-century, Jewish scholar Maimonides put it this way: When a person contemplates God's great and wondrous works and obtains a glimpse of God's incomparable and infinite wisdom, he will straightaway love and glorify Him...even as David said, "My whole being longs for God, the living God!" But at the same time, he will realize that man is a small creature, lowly and obscure, with but limited intelligence, standing in the presence of Him who is perfect in all things.

Loving and fearing God at the same time can appear to be contradictory, until you examine the concept in light of Scripture, our Jewish heritage, and the character of God Himself, as we have done in this article. Then we realize that the fear we are called to have is like a child knowing what his parents allow or disallow and the consequences of disobedience toward them. The child knows that his parents love him and only desire what is best for him, and are therefore willing to discipline him when needed in order to raise him according to what is right and wrong. Even though he may not recognize it consciously, the child understands that the parameters his parents have placed around his life actually provide freedom in which he can experience the world in which he lives. The child subsequently has a healthy fear of his parents but, at the same time, loves and trusts them because he knows that they love him.

The writer of Hebrews understood this concept: *"My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons"* (12:5b-7a).



## A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

Though every Christian must live in the fear of the Lord to some degree, sometimes we may sense it more dramatically than other times. This was true for Peter Robertson, our CFO.

Over recent years, it seems the fear of the Lord has intensified within me, and as a result, I have come into a closer and more intimate relationship with God. An important catalyst for this was undoubtedly observing the backsliding (turning away from faith in God) of a loved one. To watch the unraveling of a loved one's faith is, in my experience, perhaps one of the most profoundly distressing things of all. To witness, at close quarters, their denial of God's goodness and their rejection of His love, mercy, and abundant grace is heartbreaking and to realize (if one were to dwell upon them) the eternal consequences are horrific.





A reaction to observing this was to be stricken by a fear of the Lord that was so profound that it caused me to relook at my relationship with the Lord and to seek more fully the Lord's plan and purpose therein. Prior to this, I truly believed that I was living a life that was pleasing to the Lord. Maybe I was, but He showed me several areas where I was still lacking. The increased fear of the Lord was accompanied by a humbling and a realization that, at times, I was lacking in love for the saints and that I valued my comfort too much.

Through this experience, He also gave me more of a heart (and a fear) for those who do not know Him as their God. As a result, I find myself praying more for the lost. God is so merciful in the way that He molds and shapes us, and His refining fire is, without doubt, something that we all need to experience from time to time (or perhaps constantly). I fear Him as a loving Father (parent), who only wants what is best for me and who I can trust implicitly with my life.

To love God is to fear Him and to live constantly in awe of Him, which is undiluted reverence to a perfect, mighty and righteous God. *"Don't be jealous of sinners; instead **always fear the Lord**"* (Prov. 23:17, HCSB, emphasis added).

By Peter Robertson, CFO and  
Cheryl Hauer, International Development Director

## TO LOVE GOD IS TO FEAR HIM AND TO LIVE CONSTANTLY IN AWE OF HIM.

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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

**M**any pastors, Bible teachers, and lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding "yes"! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. *"For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem"* (Isaiah 2:3).

