

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Fearing God: The Beginning of Wisdom

He hath given meat unto them that fear him: he will ever be mindful of his covenant. He hath shewed his people the power of his works, that he may give them the heritage of the heathen. The works of his hands are verity and judgment; all his commandments are sure. They stand fast for ever and ever, and are done in truth and uprightness. He sent redemption unto his people: he hath commanded his covenant for ever: holy and reverend is his name. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth for ever. (Psalm 111:5-10)

Psalm 111 is an acrostic psalm. It is likely that Hebrew poets used the acrostic structure in certain psalms to call attention to the importance of the psalm's message, as well as to make the psalm more easily memorized. "Psalms 111 and 112 are closely connected in structure, content, and language. Both are regular acrostic psalms of twenty-two lines corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Ps 111 celebrates the power, goodness, and righteousness of Yahweh; Ps 112 describes the blessedness of those who serve him. Both psalms draw largely from older psalms and from Proverbs."¹ Smith suggests that the redemption mentioned in this psalm refers to God's deliverance of His people from Egyptian slavery. "By that great deliverance Yahweh revealed himself as a God who is holy and must be feared. To fear him, therefore, is the starting point of all true wisdom. That wisdom manifests itself in obedience to Yahweh's commandments. In obedience one gains insight. All the attributes of God which demand man's praise are eternal. Therefore, people should praise God forever."² Whether we can reach such a specific conclusion as Smith's or not, the point of the psalm remains the same. God's goodness requires the wise response of both worship and fear from His people. The Old Testament principle of redemption involves an intimate family relationship. Only a near relative could step into a man's private world and pay the debt that he was unable to pay, redeeming him from personal, though temporary, servitude. By the many Old Testament references to God's

redeeming His people, we are instructed that God views His people as His intimate family. He never makes redemption possible. He never offers redemption. He redeems His enslaved people from their just debts. This principle carries over to the New Testament doctrine of redemption in which the Lord Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, entered His world and suffered to redeem His people from their indebtedness to divine justice (Matthew 1:21).

Following the rich comment regarding redemption, the psalm mentions "...he hath commanded his covenant for ever." Men, even the most conscientious of men, may break their words or vows. Occasionally they break them because they simply promise more than they are capable of delivering. At other times they change their minds and break their promises out of their fickle nature. If we translate the Old Testament concept of "covenant" to our culture, we apply the idea to every aspect of our conduct in which we "sign on the dotted line." Apply the idea of covenant keeping to every financial contract or agreement that you have signed. Then review the number of financial disasters that appear in our time. Someone is signing financial agreements to gain more money, to live above their ability to pay, with less than an honorable intent to pay their debts. Years ago I worked for a company that sold its products and also offered to finance the cost of the product. As the company's sales grew and the press for profit increasingly nudged the business climate, the firm increasingly approved sales to people with less than desirable credit history. Increasing effort was required to collect payments from people who became delinquent. On one occasion I reviewed a letter from a man who wrote our credit manager, trying to get out of the debt. He pleaded that he

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¹Smith, J. E. (1996). *The wisdom literature and Psalms*. Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co.

²Smith, J. E. (1996). *The wisdom literature and Psalms*. Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co.

was a minister in a particular denomination and was busy doing God's work. For this reason, as he argued, we should simply forgive his legal debt. He apparently had no sense that his Christian ministry required him to pay his debts, not use his faith as an excuse not to pay. How much credibility would he have trying to minister to our company's credit manager? According to this man who made credit and collections his career, the religious plea was far more common than one would expect. The Biblical concept of the fear of God should motivate a professing Christian—far more a minister—to faithfully pay his debts, not use religion as a convenient vehicle to avoid paying. The psalm's depicting of God as commanding His covenant for ever means that God always honors His covenant. We may safely depend on God to keep His covenant. He does not live above His means and use credit cards to fund excessive debt. *He makes no promises that He does not keep.*

The proper motive for serving God—for fearing God—relates to His goodness, not to what we stand to gain. "The Beginning of Wisdom. **The fear of the Lord.** The psalm closes with a familiar maxim of the Wisdom writers. This kind of **fear** is best understood as *reverence* and *awe* that pervade every area of life. It is the beginning of true religion in that insight and understanding follow. It is also the consummation, for it is never replaced in true religious expression."³ Notice the companion adjectives that Smith uses to define the fear of God, "*reverence* and *awe* that pervade every area of life." Far too many professing Christians exhibit model reverence and awe during those brief weekly gatherings in a church building, but far fewer allow the same reverence and awe toward God to permeate their careers, families, and other personal activities. We occasionally sing "I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene," but how do we live in His presence?

"It is not only reasonable that we should fear God, because his name is reverend and his nature is holy, but it is advantageous to us. ...It is the head of wisdom, that is (as we read it), it is *the beginning of wisdom*. Men can never begin to be wise till they begin to fear God; all true wisdom takes its rise from true religion, and has its foundation in it. Or, as some understand it, it is the chief wisdom, and the most excellent, the first in dignity. It is the principal wisdom, and the

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³Pfeiffer, C. F. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible commentary : Old Testament* (Ps 111:10). Chicago: Moody Press.

principal of wisdom, to worship God and give honour to him as our Father and Master. Those manage well who always act under the government of his holy fear. ... "Where the fear of the Lord rules in the heart there will be a constant conscientious care to keep his commandments, not to talk of them, but to do them..."⁴

Consider this generic, but common scenario in today's feminist culture. You are married to a spouse who refuses to mold either his or her personal conduct toward the marriage according to the basic teaching of Scripture. For purposes of this illustration, let's consider the two most basic New Testament principles of the godly marriage relationship. The husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church, and the wife is to respectfully submit to her husband (Ephesians 5). A wife insists on domineering her will over her husband and family, privately boasting that she can get her husband to do whatever she wishes without him even knowing that she motivated his decision. As the husband, what do you do? Do you go along because the price you'd pay for any other conduct is simply too high? Many husbands choose this course and are later bewildered at the pandemonium that destroys their family. Why should they be surprised? They failed to insist on their wife following the most obvious principle of a godly, Biblical marriage. The question in light of our lesson is this. Did the husband who failed to love his wife enough to insist that she, along with him, follow God's model, fear God or his wife? Obviously, he feared the consequences of his wife's displeasure more than he feared God. In the Biblical marriage neither the husband nor the wife seeks to dominate and control the spouse. They mutually submit to God and to the Biblical model of marriage.

Fearing God means that we live every aspect of our life according to God's rule, not according to our perception of convenience or accommodation, that we fear God more than we fear man, be that man our employer, our spouse, or anyone else in our life. We cannot view God with *reverence* and *awe* and ignore His commandments for our lives. The true Christian ethic holds God in higher regard than the conveniences of any human relationship. May our awe for God translate into joyful and submissive obedience to Him.

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⁴Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Ps 111:6). Peabody: Hendrickson.

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