

TREMBLING AT GOD'S WORD

by Walton Weaver

A lack of respect for God and his word is what is lacking in our world today. But as we all know, this has always been the problem with man. Even those who have some measure of respect for God do not have enough to make a difference in their lives. Others do honor the word of God by living in such a way as to show the respect they have for God and his word.

Isaiah says that God will look favorably upon the one “who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2). The “contrite spirit” that is mentioned is the key that unlocks the meaning of what Isaiah means by the word “tremble” in the next phrase. Just to be afraid of God or his word is not enough. To tremble at God’s word is to be so affected by it as to be brought to repentance. Let’s begin by developing this point a little more.

MERE TREMBLING IS NOT ENOUGH

We have examples in the Bible that show that trembling alone is not enough. James says, “You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?” (James 2:19-20, NKJV). Belief in God or in Jesus Christ is sometimes enough to cause one to tremble. We would probably expect that one would be made afraid when he is brought face to face with certain truths about God, which is what is being done when one gives consideration to God’s word. James uses the demons as an example of this very point. They believe in Jesus Christ. They know he is truly the Son of God. If you need an illustration of this, take a look at Mark 3:10-11: “For He healed many, so that as many as had affliction pressed about him to touch Him. And the unclean spirits, whenever they saw Him, fell down before Him and cried out, saying, ‘You are the Son of God’” (see also Luke 4:41 and Matt. 8:28-29). If ever there was a case where belief and being afraid at the hearing of God’s word are not enough, this example used by James makes that case for us.

Felix also illustrates this same point. When Paul reasoned with him concerning “righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, ‘Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you’” (Acts 24:25, NKJV). For “Felix was afraid” the KJV has, “Felix trembled.” The word used here is not the same word used in the example discussed in the above paragraph (James 2:18-19). The word used to describe Felix’s reaction to what was preached is a word that comes from a word which means “fear.” For this reason, Arndt and Gingrich define the word as meaning “afraid, startled, terrified” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 257). Other versions render the word in this way: “was terrified” (ASV), “became

terrified” (NASB), “was afraid” (NKJV).

Felix, however, was like a lot of people today. Oftentimes people become disturbed at the hearing of a message like that preached by Paul to Felix, but they continue to do nothing about it. They understand their accountability to God (Rom. 14:12; 2 Cor. 5:10), and because they have this knowledge that someday they must stand before him to give account for their lives, they may become terrified, or be moved to fear, by such preaching. But, as with Felix, being afraid, or moved to trembling, at the word of God when it is preached is not enough. So far as we know, Felix never found a “right time” to become a Christian in spite of his ability to be moved to terror as he heard the word of God preached.

THE RIGHT WAY TO HEAR GOD’S WORD

Fear before God and his word is a healthy thing. The wise man says man is to “fear God and keep his commandments, for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccl. 12:13-14, NKJV). Not only must man recognize his accountability before God, but he must also have an understanding of the fear of the Lord. Right after mentioning man’s accountability to God in 2 Corinthians 5:10, Paul says, “Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men . . .” If man is to serve God acceptably he will do so “with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:28-29). This sense of accountability to God, and an understanding of the terror of the Lord, are two things that have led many people through the years to live their lives responsibly before God. The ability to tremble at God’s presence, or at the hearing of God’s word, had a positive influence for good in the life of Moses (Acts 7:32), Israel at Sinai (Exodus 19:16), Eli (1 Sam. 4:13), and the people in Amos’ day (Amos 9:4).

In the days of the early church we learn of a certain kind of fear that even the unbelievers in Jerusalem came to have as they witnessed the wonderful things that were being done in their city. In his comments on Acts 2:43, J. W. McGarvey says,

“Next to this brief notice of the public service of the church [v. 42, “and they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine,” etc. —ww], we have a glance of the effect of the scenes just described on the surrounding community: **(43) And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.** This fear was not that which partakes of aversion; for we learn below (47) that many were daily added to the church. It was that solemn awe which miracles naturally inspire, mingled with profound reverence for a community universally characterized by holy living.”

Later, upon learning of the punishment by death that had been brought upon Ananias and Sapphira because of their sin against God and the Holy Spirit, we read that “great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things” (Acts 5:11). Luke reports later that “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” (Acts 9:31). Examples of warning as well as successes in the church have a way of instilling a proper kind of fear in the hearts of those who want to do right before God. With these kinds of examples we can understand better why Paul instructs Christians to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).

When the Lord appeared to Saul we are told by Luke that as a result of this miraculous event Saul was both “trembling and astonished” (Acts 9:6). The Philippian jailer, when he witnessed the earthquake brought by God in the middle of the night, “fell down trembling before Paul and Silas” (Acts 16:29). The fear that led to trembling on the part of these men led them both to give a ready hearing to the word of the Lord, and in both cases as we read on we learn that each of these men became Christians through their obedience to the gospel preached to them.

A GOOD REASON TO TREMBLE AT GOD’S WORD

Think about it, friend. Why wouldn’t one who understands that the authority of God is behind his word be struck with awe and reverence upon hearing that word preached. If that word is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16), is sharper than any two-edged sword (Heb. 4:12), will not return unto God void (Isa. 55:10-11), and will some day judge us (John 12:48), should we not be struck with awe and reverence as we read it or hear it preached unto us?

The message of the gospel is of course capable of saving or destroying. The hearing of God’s word must be mixed with faith or it will not profit (Heb. 4:2). Paul says of himself and the other apostles through whom the knowledge of Christ was at that time being revealed, “Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor. 2:14-16).

The truth is, one must have enough reverence for God and his word that when he hears it he will allow it to produce faith in his heart (Rom. 10:17), and upon coming to understand it to obey its commands (Matt. 7:21-23; Lk. 6:46; Heb. 5:8-9; 1 Pet. 4:17-18; 2 Thess. 1:7-9; Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:37-38; 22:16). He must then continue to work out his salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12), being true and faithful to his Lord all the way to the end (Matt. 6:33; 1 Cor. 15:58; Col. 1:23; Rev. 2:10; 2 Tim. 4:6-8). One who is

faithful to the Lord is expecting him to return and hear him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant . . .” (Matt. 25:21, 23), and, “Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world “ (Matt. 25:34).