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The JOY *of* FEARING GOD

*The Fear of the Lord is a
Life-Giving Fountain*

PROVERBS 14:27



JERRY
BRIDGES

Praise for
The Joy of Fearing God

“*The Joy of Fearing God*, like its author, is a timeless classic. Years ago I led a group study of this unique book, and we all found it deeply refreshing and rewarding in our walks with Christ. I have the highest regard for Jerry Bridges, and I’m delighted to see one of his greatest books available for a new generation of readers!”

—RANDY ALCORN, author of *Heaven* and *Happiness*

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speaker

“Jerry Bridges has deeply plumbed and warmly written about the gospel for decades. This work, *The Joy of Fearing God*, is no different. The fear of God he writes of in his classic work is one of intense, joyous, intimate relationship with a sovereign God who, though He demands perfect obedience, has nevertheless opened wide his arms of welcome to sinners. It is because we are conscious of both our own sinfulness and His indescribable condescension and love that we run into His presence with

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"*Joy* and *fear* are not two words that usually go together. Jerry Bridges shows why they do—indeed, must—go together when it comes to our relationship with God. Drawing from deep wells of scriptural and historical reflection, Bridges introduces us to a God who amazes us with His power and woos us with His grace."

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—JONATHAN PARNELL, lead pastor, Cities Church,
Minneapolis–St. Paul

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WATERBROOK
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THE JOY OF FEARING GOD
PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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Trade Paperback ISBN 978-1-4000-7064-0
eBook ISBN 978-0-307-55194-8

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Cover design by Mark D. Ford; cover photo by Andy and Michelle Kerry, Trevillion Images

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America
2016—Revised Edition

15 14 13 11 12 10

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To
JEFF AND KATHY
DAN AND LISA

These are the commands, decrees and laws
the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe
in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess,
so that you, your children and their children after them
may fear the LORD your God as long as you live
by keeping all his decrees and commands
that I give you, and so that you may
enjoy long life.

DEUTERONOMY 6:1–2

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FROM A FELLOW PILGRIM

PROVERBS 31:30 reads, “Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.” I memorized that verse (in the King James Version) more than forty years ago to give myself, as a young single man, an important guideline in looking for a wife.

But what does it mean *to fear the Lord*? Looking back now, I realize I had only the foggiest notion. I suggest this is true for most Christians.

Fast-forward my life almost thirty years to 1982. While doing research for a book on godliness I came across the statement that “the fear of God is the soul of godliness.” My attention was arrested, and I began a small study on the fear of God. Ten or so years later, my friend Dan Rich asked me to consider writing a book on the subject. This book is the response to that request.

A man who is himself a nationally known Bible teacher has said that people who teach the Bible are hypocrites because none of them live up to their teaching. I agree with the intent of his statement, but not his choice of words. In my mind a hypocrite is someone who pretends to be something he isn't. At the same time, though, I agree that none of us live up to the truths we teach. I don't want to be a hypocrite—so let me say right up front that I don't fully live up to the standard of truth presented in this book. I want to and I seek to, but I'm not there yet, nor will I ever be completely, in this life.

So as you read this book, think of me as a fellow pilgrim walking alongside you. I'm not on top of the peak calling you to climb up where I am. Rather I'm standing with you as we both look to the summit of this great mountain called the fear of God. It's a challenging climb upward, but also a joyous climb. My prayer is that this book will help us both in our journey.

MY THANKS

I'm grateful to several people who have contributed significantly to this book. My pastor friends Larry McCall and Steve Martin brought to my attention, or supplied me with, valuable resource material. Thomas Womack, my editor, contributed far beyond an editor's usual responsibilities. And the entire team at WaterBrook Press has been supportive and encouraging. A few friends have taken a special interest in this project and have prayed regularly for me in it. To all of you, thank you so much.

The JOY
of
FEARING
GOD

PART I



WHAT IS THIS FEAR?

I



GLORIOUS TRUTH

Joy, Wisdom, and the Fear of God

THE *JOY OF FEARING GOD*? It sounds like a contradiction in terms. One of the first times I used the expression, my listener (a Christian leader) gave a puzzled look and responded, “That’s an interesting combination of words.” I suspect he was being polite as he really thought, “How can anyone enjoy fear? And more to the point, how can you enjoy fearing God? Christianity means a relationship with God—but how can you have a relationship with someone you fear?”

The fact that a Christian leader would respond to this concept with a puzzled look tells us something about the current state of Christianity. There was a time when committed Christians were known as God-fearing people. This was a badge of honor. But somewhere along the way we lost it. Now the idea of fearing God, if thought of at all, seems like a relic from the past. That’s to our detriment. The fear of God is actually as relevant today as it was in bygone generations.

And strange as it may seem, there *is* joy in fearing God. The Bible says God delights in those who fear Him and holds out to them the promise of blessing. Surely then, this is a subject that deserves our attention.

But what *is* the fear of God?

When we mention this concept, one proverb from the Bible seems particularly to come to mind: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” I’m not sure why that one sticks in our memory, but it seems to be almost as universally recognized as “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Unfortunately, while both statements are widely recognized, few people seek to apply them in their daily lives.

So let’s begin our study by looking at this verse, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). As we do, let’s first consider its corollary, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7). *Knowledge* and *wisdom* are not the same, though they’re closely related. We might describe wisdom as the best application and use of the knowledge we have. So we need to consider the beginning of knowledge before we look at the beginning of wisdom.

FOUNDATION FOR RIGHT PERSPECTIVES

Proverbs 1:7 reads in full, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.” *Knowledge* as used here is more than an accumulation of information. It involves the ability to view that information with the right perspective and to use it for its proper end. Paul, for example, speaks of a knowledge that “puffs up” (1 Corinthians 8:1) as well as a knowledge that “leads to godliness” (Titus 1:1). Only the latter has the right perspective and proper end in mind.

Two people may possess essentially the same knowledge in the sense of a body of facts. One person views this knowledge as a means of acquiring position, power, or possessions, and uses it to that end. The other person sees it as a gift from God and as a stewardship to be used to serve Him.

Contrast two physicians, both with approximately the same training and skill. One fears God and earnestly seeks to use his expertise to serve Him

by serving people. The other has no fear of God and uses his skill as an abortionist. Both doctors have the same information but not the same knowledge. Only the one who fears God has the right perspective, which leads him to use his information for the proper end.

Solomon says that knowledge begins not in learning a body of information or in acquiring various skills, but in the fear of the Lord. He is saying that the fear of God must be the foundation upon which knowledge is built. It is the fear of the Lord that gives us the right perspective and prompts us to use it for the right end. It is the fear of the Lord that should determine our fundamental outlook on life.

Our main goal in life should be to glorify God. That is the ultimate goal to which all knowledge should be directed. Regardless of how helpful an item or body of knowledge may be to society, if it does not have as its final purpose the glory of God, it remains defective. It is at best partial and to a degree distorted. It is like a structure without a foundation, a plant without a root.

Of course since our fear of God is always imperfect, our knowledge will always be defective and incomplete—not only factually, but also in its use. But the person who does not fear God doesn't even have the right foundation on which to build. He may be a decent person and generally beneficial to society, but in the end he falls short because he neither knows nor fears God. Let me give you an example.

Several years ago I read *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis* by Michael Denton, an Australian physician who does research in microbiology. In my opinion his book is one of the most brilliant and devastating critiques of the theory of evolution available today. Dr. Denton did his homework well. From a number of perspectives he makes a convincing case that animal life as we see it today, and particularly the human body and brain, must be the product of specific design by an infinitely intelligent designer rather than the result of mere time and chance.

As you read through the book, you keep waiting for Dr. Denton to make a seemingly obvious statement that this intelligent designer must be God. Instead the book ends with this remarkable sentence: “The ‘mystery

of mysteries'—the origin of new beings on earth—is still largely as enigmatic as when Darwin set sail on the *Beagle*.¹ After thoroughly debunking the Darwinian theory of evolution, Dr. Denton throws up his hands. “We don’t know,” he essentially says. We didn’t know before Charles Darwin made his observations about plants and animals on the Galapagos Islands, and we still don’t know today.

Why would a brilliant scientist come to such a conclusion? The reason is found in Solomon’s words that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Dr. Denton has amassed a formidable amount of information and makes a strong case against evolution, but he is unable to bring his reasoning to a successful conclusion because his knowledge is incomplete. It does not take account of God.

I found Dr. Denton’s book highly fascinating. In pursuing his objective to show the fallacy of evolution, he unwittingly gave us a book through which to marvel at the unfathomable wisdom of God in creation. On numerous occasions I found myself pausing to worship as I read. What a pity, I thought, that this man who knows a thousand times more than I about his subject could not use it to glorify God because he did not know or fear the One about whom he was writing.

People who fear God can use their knowledge both to glorify God and enjoy Him. One day I was waiting in the examining room of an ear, nose, and throat doctor. On the wall opposite my chair was a drawing of a greatly enlarged cross section of the human ear. As I looked at the tiny bones commonly called the hammer, anvil, and stirrup, I marveled at the perfection of the human ear and the ingenuity of God in designing it. I enjoyed a few moments of worship while waiting there and transformed a routine doctor’s appointment into a delightful time of fellowship with God. I know very little about the ear, but I can thoroughly enjoy the knowledge I have because it is built upon the foundation of fearing the One who created it.

My experience should be true of the believer in every field of knowledge. The student of history can enjoy the subject much more if he or

she believes that history is not merely a “tale told by an idiot” but rather the outworking of God’s sovereign plan and purpose for this world. The Christian astronomer should worship as he observes through his telescope the vast handiwork of God in the heavens. The godly farmer growing crops rejoices in the awareness that his agricultural skill comes ultimately from God, because he reads in the Bible that “God instructs him and teaches him the right way” of planting and harvesting (Isaiah 28:26). Any sphere of knowledge you’re engaged in—every aspect of your workaday world—should be to you as a believer a source of wonder and worship and should be used as a means of glorifying God. And it will be if you enjoy the fear of God.

Finally, we must consider the most important knowledge of all. Jesus said, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). In reality this is where true knowledge begins. The person who knows God and fears Him possesses something more valuable than all the combined knowledge of philosophy and science put together. The scientist and the philosopher may discover ways to improve this life; the Christian has found the way to eternal life. That the Christian’s knowledge is more valuable was attested by Jesus when He said, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:36–37).

WHERE WISDOM BEGINS

Now we come to wisdom. Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” Again observe the close connection between wisdom and knowledge. Both Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10 use both words. Since wisdom is knowledge applied to the right end, knowledge realizes its purpose only in conjunction with wisdom.

Wisdom is commonly defined as good judgment or the ability to develop the best course of action in response to a given situation. In the Bible, however, wisdom has a strong ethical content. For example, James 3:17 says, “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peaceloving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

The ethical emphasis in wisdom is particularly strong in Proverbs. This doesn’t exclude what we might call the practical dimension, such as the wise use of time or money. In fact the book of Proverbs is filled with instructions for day-to-day living. But this practical wisdom always has an ethical tone to it. Wisdom in Proverbs is more concerned with righteous living than with shrewd judgment. The practical is never divorced from the ethical.

It is with this ethical-practical relationship in mind that we should understand how the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Just as the fear of God is the foundation of knowledge, so it’s also the foundation of wisdom.

Consider for example Proverbs 11:1 — “The LORD abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight.” Society says, “Honesty is the best policy.” Why? The world’s answer is, it’s good for business. The honest auto repair shop gets a good reputation and presumably more cars to repair. Biblical wisdom, however, recognizes that God—even more than the customer—is concerned about honesty. Biblical wisdom always factors God into the equation. Society might cut corners when it isn’t apt to hurt business, but the person who fears the Lord strives to be honest all the time. He’s more concerned about pleasing God than about what’s good for his business.

The fact is, honesty *is* the best policy. That’s practical wisdom. That’s what the world says (though too often it doesn’t practice it). But this kind of wisdom has the wrong foundation. It is essentially self-serving. It leads us in the wrong direction and ultimately ends in futility and frustration. By contrast, wisdom based on the fear of God recognizes the supremacy of

God over every area of life and realizes that it is God who sends poverty and wealth, who humbles and exalts (1 Samuel 2:7). And in this wisdom rests, and it rejoices in the fear of God.

This principle that wisdom based on the fear of God ultimately leads to joyful living is taught over and over in the book of Proverbs, and throughout the Bible for that matter. One of its most meaningful illustrations for me is found in Proverbs 15:16–17 — “Better a little with the fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil. Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred.”

The particular principle set forth here is that love is more valuable than wealth. A “meal of vegetables” is descriptive of a poor-to-moderate living standard. In Solomon’s day, ordinary people rarely had meat. On the other hand, “a fattened calf” connotes a wealthy family. With this background we can understand Solomon as saying that it’s better to live in a poor family with love than in a wealthy family with hatred. This kind of wisdom can come only from the Lord.

The truth that love is more valuable than wealth ought to be self-evident. Yet throughout history, and especially in our culture today, it’s obvious that wealth is deemed more valuable than love. People might deny that, but their actions speak louder than their words. Our society literally chases after wealth and possessions. This is true in inner-city ghettos as well as in upscale suburbs. All levels of our society base their supposed happiness on their ability to acquire the possessions they want.

This drive to acquire money and possessions has wide-ranging social implications. To name one, many parents place their professions or jobs above their children. It often results in a “swinging door” syndrome at home whereby families seldom sit down together to a meal, let alone spend extended time together. Parents become alienated from each other, and children from their parents, all in the interest of acquiring more things.

Families who base their wisdom for living on the fear of God, however, recognize that “a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). They esteem love far more than material things.

Some of these families may indeed be blessed by God with wealth, but that isn't the defining characteristic of their lives.

The priority of love over possessions was brought home to me deeply and poignantly some ten years ago. My wife of twenty-five years was dying of cancer. We had been on the staff of a Christian organization all our married lives, and our income had usually hovered around barely adequate. If we went out to eat, it was to Burger King or the local cafeteria. We seldom had discretionary income.

Two things we did have lots of, though, were love and fun. My wife had elected to be a full-time, stay-at-home mom. She spent hours with the children when they were small, and after they were in school she never missed a game or scholastic event in which they participated. When I left for the office each morning, she always stood at the door to wave a loving good-bye. Our standard of living could have been described by Solomon's expression as "a meal of vegetables." But we had lots of love, and we enjoyed life.

With this history of twenty-five years of love and the realization that my wife was probably dying, I came across Proverbs 15:16–17 one day in my Bible reading. As I read, I wept for joy. I wrote in the margin of my Bible, "Thank you, Father, for a home with love."

My wife has now been with the Lord for ten years, but still today "her children arise and call her blessed" (Proverbs 31:28). There is joy in fearing God and in the wisdom that comes from it.

GOD'S TRUST FUND

Before we end this chapter, let me give you one more reason, from my own experience, why there is joy in fearing God.

Psalms 31:19 reads, "How great is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you, which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you." God is pictured here like a wealthy person who establishes trust funds for his children to be used after they

reach maturity. The money is on hand, it has been set aside—but it isn't available to the children until they reach the prescribed age.

That is what God does for those who fear Him. He sets aside or stores up goodness for His children, to be given at appropriate times in the future. What this goodness is, and when it will be bestowed, is unique to each individual according to God's plan and purpose for that person.

I came across Psalm 31:19 during one of the more difficult periods of my life. I desperately needed encouragement at the time, and God gave it to me through that Scripture. What caught my attention was the thought that God *stores up* goodness, which He bestows at some time in the future. Even though things may be dark today, God is still storing up goodness for us.

As I prayed over Psalm 31:19 during those discouraging days, God gave hope that at some point in the future He would once again bestow His goodness, the goodness that He was then storing up for me. That's exactly what happened. In due time God opened up ministry opportunities far beyond anything I had ever imagined. Ironically, the very circumstances that brought about those discouraging days were used by God to both equip me and set me free for the ministry He had stored up to bestow in His good time.

Notice, though, that God stores up His goodness not for everyone, but for *those who fear Him*. How are we to understand this condition? Why did I think I qualified and had a right to gather confidence from that Scripture? This verse is an example of parallelism; that is, where a single idea may be stated again in another form. In this case, fearing God and taking refuge in Him are the parallel thoughts. We have not yet discussed what it means to fear God, but I can anticipate that discussion by saying that taking refuge in God is one expression or outworking of fearing Him.

Though the circumstances leading to that discouraging period occurred years ago, I still remember how the Holy Spirit enabled me to respond. While kneeling at our living room couch early one morning,

the words of Job 1:21 came to mind: “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.” As I prayed over that verse, I was able to trust in the sovereignty of God, to believe He was in control of my future, and to submit myself to whatever He was doing. To use the words of 1 Peter 5:7, I humbled myself under His mighty hand and trusted Him for the outcome. This is what it meant for me to fear the Lord in that situation. The *joy* of fearing Him did not come immediately, but it certainly did in His good time.

The assurance of future good, however, is not limited just to the difficult periods of life. The Holy Spirit no doubt brought Psalm 31:19 to my attention at that particular time to encourage and give me hope. The wonderful truth, though, is that God is always storing up good for those who take refuge in Him, and He bestows it at the proper time. That’s another reason why there’s joy in fearing God.

WHAT IS THE FEAR OF GOD?

We’ve come this far, and I still haven’t defined the fear of God. That’s because it’s better described than defined. I’ve planted clues in this chapter which you’ve probably picked up, and they’ll get more explicit as we go along. In the next chapter I’ll give a concise definition, and a more expanded one follows in chapter three, but that’s just to get us started. Actually the whole book is an attempt to describe the biblical concept of the fear of God and its outworking in our lives.

So join me in our journey to discover that there’s joy in the fear of God; that the title of this book is not an oxymoron, but a glorious truth. We’ll start with a brief story about a young marine whose experiences will help us begin to see what it means to fear God. I realize that some who read this book may not be able to identify with the experiences I describe of Marine Corps life. But I believe the truths illustrated in the story will be clear and you’ll have no difficulty understanding them. So let’s go now to this parable.

Notes

1. Michael Denton, *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis* (Bethesda, Md.: Adler & Adler, 1985), 358–9.

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