

# **The Fear Of God**

For who in the heavens can be compared to the LORD? Who among the sons of the mighty can be likened to the LORD? God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be held in reverence by all those around Him. (Psalm 89:6-7)

## Introduction

The fear of God is a topic which is rarely considered in modern times and, when it is, is more often than not treated in a superficial or even in a derogatory way. A frequency analysis of the usage of the phrase “fear of God” in books shows a large peak in the 1600s followed by a sharp decline into the 1700s. There is another rounded peak around 1825, about 1/3 of the height of the one in the late 1600s followed by another dramatic decline into the 1900s. The appearance of the phrase in modern times is around 1/100 of the peak. Clearly the idea of the fear of God has fallen largely out of favor in comparison with the time of the Puritans.



On the other hand, the phrase “God loves you” has steadily increased in popularity since the end of WWII. Apart from some spikes in the 1600s, throughout the 1700s and 1800s those words were relatively uncommon. Then, beginning around 1950, the words “God loves you” have grown in usage by a factor of about 25.



These two factors indicate a dramatic shift in the theology of modern times away from the serious consideration of the fear of God toward a theology which is man-centered and which focuses its

attention on the unconditional love of God toward men. And this shift in the theological thinking of the church indicates a radical departure from the profoundly Biblical and God-centered theology of the Reformation to the lukewarm, man-centered theology of modern times. Prior to the 1950s it was not uncommon for a man to be characterized as a God-fearer or as a God-fearing man whereas nowadays these words are not even a part of our vocabulary. We might say a man is a church-goer or that he is a good Christian but the idea of fearing God as a positive character trait has simply passed out of our thinking almost completely. Even among Reformed Christians, the idea of the fear of God has almost completely disappeared. This fundamental change in the thinking of the church reflects a fundamental change in the view of God. No longer is the fear of God considered in a positive light, but as something which indicates the immaturity of the believer. The fear of God is often thought to be replaced by love, by a dangerous misinterpretation of 1 John 4:18 which does say that “perfect love casts out fear” but is only to be taken of that servile fear of condemnation. So churches teach that the fear of God is something Christians must strive to grow out of by the perfection of love. But there is a great gulf between that kind of thinking and the theme verse of this study which states that “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints.” And how far we have fallen from the lofty heights of Puritans such as John Owen who wrote that in godly fear “consists the very life of all religion ... where that is not in exercise, nothing is accepted with him.” [Owen]. And Jonathan Edwards wrote that, “true godliness in general is very commonly called the fear of God.” [Edwards]. And John Bunyan wrote, “For there is no duty performed by us that can by any means be accepted of God if it be not seasoned with godly fear. Wherefore the apostle saith, ‘Let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and godly fear’ (Heb 12:28)” [Bunyan].

My purpose in this study is to show from the Scriptures that a godly love of God and a godly fear of God are really one and the same – not exactly identical but two sides of the same coin – they are mutually supportive and sustaining such that if we are to grow in the love of God we must likewise grow in the fear of God. And if we foolishly cast away the godly fear of God, the godly love of God will certainly go out the window right along with it. But if we are careful to nurture the godly fear of God, our love of God will likewise graciously grow. Of course, we must be careful to distinguish the godly fear of God from various sorts of ungodly fear just as we must equally distinguish the ungodly forms of love from the godly. For, there is a false love toward God which is not grounded in the fear of God, which actually leads away from godliness, as if the Lord had never said, “if you love me, you will keep my commandments.” The converse of that statement is also true – if you do not keep His commandments, you really do not have the godly love of God in you. And there are false fears of God which are not grounded in the love of God but rather in the hatred of God. This kind of fear will drive us away from God rather than drawing us closer as if the Scriptures had never said, “But *there is* forgiveness with You, that You may be feared” (Psalm 130:4).

And so we will begin by considering some examples from the Scriptures of the ungodly fear of God.

## Ungodly Fears of God

**"Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.'" (Matthew 25:24-25)**

Some think it will be acceptable to the Lord to simply return to Him what is His. “See”, they will say, “I have lost nothing of that which you have entrusted to me. Here you have what is yours.” And so it is God’s righteous judgment to convict them because though they have not lost the talent they have wasted the precious time given to them in not bearing fruit for His glory. Some spend their whole lives on their own well-being and have no time for the glory of the Lord. And brothers and sisters, how easy it

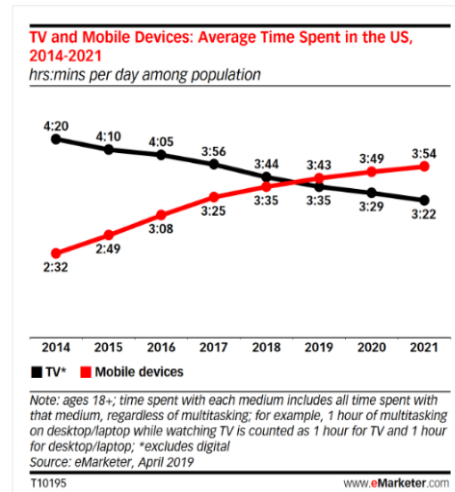
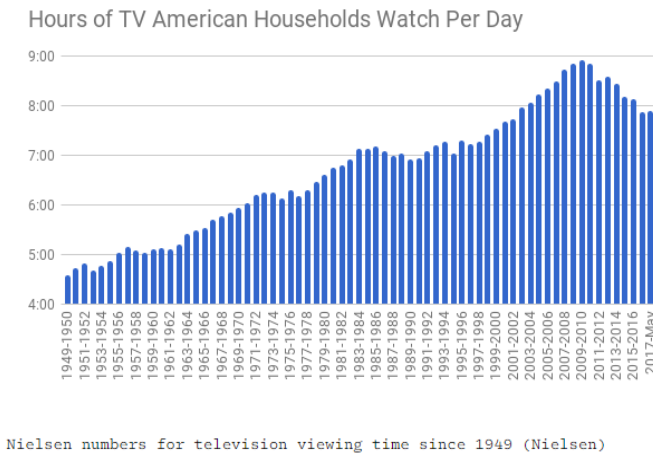


Figure 1. Time Americans Spend Watching TV and Face Down in their Phones

is to squander our time and leave the talent buried in the ground. The Lord gives us time as well as talent but how guilty we all are of wasting that precious time on our own pleasures. You can drive down any street in America in the evening and you’ll see that people have plenty of time to sit and watch hours of TV every night. But how much time is spent each week in prayer? How much do you spend? Be honest in your own mind. How much time do you spend watching TV or doom scrolling your phone? It is illuminating to consider the time spent watching TV and on mobile devices. The charts above show that the TV is on in the average American home for 8-9 hours per day and people also spend as much as 4 hours on their phones every day.

I’m glad that some carve out a time to read the Scriptures every day because of the reading plan, and praise God that some are following those, but don’t let that hold you back from reading more. There are always other things that get in the way – like Martha, we hustle for material things but like Mary should choose the better part. And many people are afraid to share the gospel with our neighbors. We are often possessed by a fear of man which reflects this ungodly fear of God. We think that God is a harsh master for burdening us with the Great Commission and we bury the talent in the ground rather than taking advantage of the many opportunities to spread the knowledge of the great salvation in Christ. We are all very much like the man who thought the Lord was a hard master, demanding much arduous labor for His kingdom. And so we bury the talent in the earth and think to merely present back to the Lord what is His with no increase.

Ultimately this fear is of one under bondage, of one under the burden of having to labor in such an unpleasant business: The man said, I was afraid of you and your unreasonable demands, and his ill-affection toward God arose from his false notions of him. Nothing is more unworthy of God, nor more hinders our duty to him, than this fear which turns the love of God to us and His elevation of us to serve Him in such a great business. This fear is grounded in hatred, and is directly opposite to the godly love

which the great commandment requires. Note that hard thoughts of God drive us away from Him, and hinder us in his service because we are seeking to please ourselves by our works rather than rejoicing in the work of Christ – whose self-sacrificing love which sets us free to serve him acceptably with reverence and godly fear. Those who are afraid of Him because of the greatness of His demands upon us will never rightly serve Him because the ungodly fear prevents godly love.

This is the first form of ungodly fear. The second form is found in 2 Kings 17.

**They feared the LORD, yet served their own gods--according to the rituals of the nations from among whom they were carried away. To this day they continue practicing the former rituals; they do not fear the LORD, nor do they follow their statutes or their ordinances, or the law and commandment which the LORD had commanded the children of Jacob, whom He named Israel with whom the LORD had made a covenant and charged them, saying: "You shall not fear other gods, nor bow down to them nor serve them nor sacrifice to them; (2 Kings 17:33-35)**

Whereas in the previous section, God was viewed a hard master, unreasonably demanding too much from us, these think that the LORD is no great King but one whose demands can be satisfied with relative ease. **They feared the LORD, yet served their own gods.** The fear that also serves other gods is by no means a godly kind of fear. It is more like a form of superstition in which one admits there is such a God but that this God is not really all sovereign Creator and Sustainer of all Life, but rather some petty local deity who can be dealt with before we get back to our own business. This is a completely inadequate comprehension of the nature of that One but is altogether commonplace all around us.

There are the Roman Catholics who fear the Lord but serve their own gods. Roman Catholicism is based on the same syncretism as in this passage in which the people combine the worship of the true God with the practice of idolatry. They fear the Lord yet serve their own gods. Roman Catholics believe that God's wrath can be appeased by the performance of certain acts of penance and that these acts of penance merit the forgiveness of God which is mediated through the priest. They imagine that God's favor can be purchased by signing the cross and a saying Hail Mary's and making donations to the church. This thinking is no different from the Samaritans in 2 Kings 17 – they believe that God is real but think His wrath can be appeased through various means imposed by the priest. And then they are free to go and serve the idols which they set up. The great implication of the Roman Catholic sacramental system is that you must fear the Lord, but then you can serve your own gods. But this is nothing like the godly fear of God.

Then there are those who claim to be Christians and yet continue in their sin. There may be a fear of the LORD in them that looks to the sacrifice of the cross but then, like a sow, returns to wallow in the mire or like a dog returns to its vomit. They are like the people in this verse in that they pretend to fear God but do not really fear the LORD because they continue to serve other gods. ....There is a form of godliness but a denial of the power of it because there is no real godly fear of God. Scripture makes them the same: Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil (Proverbs 3:7). He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (1 John 2:4)

These deny the right of this One to rule over them saying, in essence, "we will not have this Man rule over us!" This kind of fear doesn't give God the reverence that He deserves because it is lacking the awareness of the greatness of the LORD. He holds each man's life in His hand and can dispose of any

creature in any way that He sees fit. He not only rules and reigns in righteousness in the midst of His enemies. And at the end of the parable, it says so clearly – **But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me. (Luke 19:27)**

And so we now arrive at the third example of fear, the fear of imminent wrath due to judgment.

**And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" (Rev 6:15-17)**

This idea finds its origin in Isaiah 2, where it says, “And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth” (Isaiah 2:19). This is a true fear of the Lord which indicates a correct understanding of the gravity of the situation of those reprobates outside of Christ. For this God is a consuming fire. Moses fell on his face when he caught a mere glimpse of the goodness of the Lord, so what must it be like when He arises to shake the earth, when His fury shows in His face?

But these are those who had no fear of God before their eyes during their lives. They ignored and suppressed the knowledge of God and so put away the fear of God. The LORD speaks to these with these mighty words –

Fear ye not me? Saith the LORD: will ye not tremble at my presence, which have placed the sand for the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree, that it cannot pass it: and though the waves thereof toss themselves, yet can they not prevail; though they roar, yet can they not pass over it? (Jeremiah 5:22)

But there is no escaping the fear of the LORD and those who will not fear Him during their lives will yet greatly fear Him when they find themselves in the presence of Him who is a consuming fire. But what a blessing it is to experience this dread fear of condemnation while in this life and to respond to it by fleeing from the wrath to come, to run into that strong tower which is the Lord Jesus Christ, who endured the wrath of God in His humanity while hanging on the cross. There where the wrath of God has already fallen in full measure, it will not fall again. In the words of Augustus Toplady, in the great hymn, *From Whence this Fear and Unbelief?*

If Christ my discharge has procured,  
And freely in my place endured  
The whole of wrath divine—  
God will not payment twice demand,  
First at my dying Saviour's hand,  
And then again at mine.

While there will be those who will call upon the rocks to fall upon them in that great and terrible day of the LORD, to hide them from the wrath of God, you ... if you feel yourself under the wrath of God, let today be the day of your salvation. *Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.* (Hebrews 3:15). Do not suppress the knowledge of the terrifying holiness of God because there is no escaping it in the end. It is a fearful and a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the Living

God. He will recompense everyone for every thought, every idle word and every ungodly deed committed against His law. In that outer darkness, separated from every good thing, away from the presence of God's goodness, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The worm of a guilty conscience will not die but will continually torment the never-dying soul for endless time.

And now we proceed to consider an ungodly idea of the godly fear of God.

## An Ungodly Idea about the Godly Fear of God

There is an ungodly idea about the fear of God which arises from a misinterpretation of one particular verse,

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. (1 John 4:18)

The argument made by some is that this verse teaches that fear of God is temporary and that it will eventually be cast out by love. Though the verse says that "perfect love casts out fear" we must very careful to distinguish between the fear of condemnation for those outside of Christ from the godly fear which we will consider in a few moments. Furthermore, there is a need to distinguish the perfect love here spoken of from ungodly forms of love which might deceive us into casting away the fear of condemnation. It is my burden today to show that godly love and godly fear are mutually inclusive and dependent upon one other and that the fear which is cast out by the perfect love is only the servile fear of the wrath of God. While this servile fear of God is an absolutely essential requirement for our repentance unto life, it must be cast out by degrees in sanctification. In justification, the ground of the fear of condemnation is removed, as there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ (Rom 8:1). Yet the remnants of doubt remain – are you really in union with Christ? Am I really in union with Christ? But we did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." (Romans 8:15) This servile sort of fear is to be cast out by love but the error in the argument made by some is that there is to remain no fear at all. This is to throw the baby out with the bathwater! It is a tragic mistake because casting out godly fear twists and distorts the idea of that perfect love into something unrecognizable from Scripture. Instead of having a perfect love joined with a godly fear, there is left a self-seeking kind of love, EROS instead of AGAPE.

Now we will get particular. In our day, John Piper's so-called Christian Hedonism fundamentally changes the foundation of Reformed theology. He aims his attack at the very heart of Reformed theology. The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks: "what is the chief end of man?" Answer: "To glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." Piper wrote, "And I ponder: Is it just *and*? What does "and" mean? Isn't the chief end of man to glorify God *by* enjoying him forever?" This subtle change forms the foundation of Christian hedonism, which is that God is glorified by our enjoyment of Him.

In the original answer, there are two parts to the answer: (1) To glorify God and (2) to enjoy Him forever. Notice that this answer doesn't tell us HOW we are to glorify God nor how we are to enjoy Him forever. There are two unknowns in that answer which the catechism goes on to address in the following question.

What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?

The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

But Piper's idea that "we glorify God by enjoying Him" already answers the question of how we are to glorify God – by enjoying Him – so there only remains the question of how we are to enjoy Him. Note that Piper's reformulation answers the question of how we glorify God so that its answer is no longer to be sought in the Scriptures. Piper's variant undermines the second question which says that the only rule to direct us how we may glorify God is to be found in the Scriptures. Piper's idea makes our enjoyment of God the only rule for how God is to be glorified. Please realize that this is a radical reformulation of this pillar of Reformed Christian theology which has the practical outcome of removing the Biblical idea that our fear of God glorifies God as well as our love of God.

In a blog post entitled, Does Fear Belong in the Christian's Life?, Piper concludes in the negative, saying "this 'trembling trust' will then gradually remove the fear that drove us to it." He says that in moments of temptation "we ought not to be completely free from fear, because we are not completely controlled by love for God." Piper openly affirms then that when we are completely possessed by the love for God, then we will be completely free from fear. He places much of the weight of his argument on this terrible misunderstanding of 1 John 4:18 and he simply ignores the verses which teach of a godly fear and so he throws the whole baby out with the bathwater. And how easily our hearts would accept this idea that our personal enjoyment of God is the sum and substance of what it means to glorify Him. Yet, really completely contradictory to Piper's so-called Christian Hedonism, the Scriptures say "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

Piper stands at the very center of the so-called New Calvinism movement and is widely regarded as its chief spokesman. [Williams, E S.] The New Calvinists are sometimes called "the young, the restless and the Reformed" but what we see in their practice is nothing like the Puritans of old and not much distinguishable from the world. We see in that movement a great number of ethical issues which can be traced to a deficiency in the fear of God. There is an irreverence in their worship and ungodliness in their lives because the fear of the Lord has been cast out by the belief that our enjoyment of God is the sum total of what it means to glorify God. John Piper has done much damage by taking an axe to the root of Reformed theology, and this must be greatly displeasing to the LORD. The eye of the LORD is upon them that fear him (Psalm 33:18) and again, the LORD takes pleasure in them that fear him (Psalm 147:11).

So, I pray that we will not be taken in by this modern perversion of the gospel. Let us have grace, therefore, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear (Heb 12:28) and move on to consider what the Scripture means by the notion of a godly fear of God.

## The Godly Fear of God

There is another kind of fear besides the servile fear which we will call a filial fear, that is, a fear which is appropriate for the child of a great king, who is greatly awed by his father in all his royal majesty and yet who is able to approach because there is a special kind of relationship. The child of a great king would not fear that his father would condemn him but nonetheless has a profound reverence of him who is highly exalted. Though the son doesn't fear being cast away, would he then dare to approach his father in an irreverent way? No, by no means! For there is a filial fear which both loves and stands in reverent



awe of the greatness of the King's majesty. And if this be true of a human king, how much more for the infinite and eternal King who is exalted in Majesty far above all possible comprehension.

A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the LORD of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name? (Malachi 1:6)

Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy (Revelation 15:4). This is a godly fear which glorifies the name and person of God. Thus we glorify God by fearing Him and we ought to grow in this grace as we grow in the knowledge of the Lord. For, the closer that we approach to the Living God, the more awesome and majestic He will seem to us. A massive ship, like an aircraft carrier, doesn't seem so great from a distance but, when we are standing next to it, it is so large as to be awesome. If we are able to be impressed into fear by a man-made ship, how much greater should be our fear in the presence of the God who created all things?

For who in the heavens can be compared to the LORD? Who among the sons of the mighty can be likened to the LORD? God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be held in reverence by all those around Him. (Psalm 89:6-7)

To those who think that the fear of the Lord is something we ought to grow out of, as we grow in love, consider that the fear of the Lord characterizes the life and attitude of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD; His delight *is* in the fear of the LORD, (Isaiah 11:2-3a)

The spirit of knowledge of the LORD in Christ did not diminish the fear of the LORD in Him but rather supported and maintained it. He Himself is God manifest in the flesh and was wholly separate from sin and had absolutely no fear of condemnation and yet the spirit of the fear of the LORD rested upon Him. His delight was in the fear of the LORD. This must be our model of godly fear because it characterized the glorious Son of God who thought it not robbery to be equal with God. If the Holy One of God is characterized by the fear of the LORD, then what gives us the right to think we should be done with the fear of Him. The Lord Jesus loved the LORD God His Father with all His heart, mind, soul and strength since this is the great commandment of the law and He fulfilled every jot and tittle of the law. So, how dare we imagine that perfect love should cast out the fear of the LORD? Rather, we see in His glorious holiness, that His perfectly holy love of God is forever joined with a perfectly holy fear of God.

When we read in Psalm 130, that "there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared" (Psalm 130:4) we might expect to read, "there is forgiveness with thee, that though mayest be loved" as forgiveness seems more likely to generate love than fear. But it says something unexpected – that thou mayest be feared. This is not fear in any servile sense, but a godly kind of fear. For in nothing else is the full, awesome reality of the divine nature more evident than in the bestowal of forgiveness. At what great cost was forgiveness purchased. Will we not fear Him because of the exceedingly greatness of His nature manifested in the forgiveness of sin? And Hosea likewise says that "They shall **fear** the LORD and His **goodness** in the latter days" (Hosea 3:5). God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints – not in the assembly of the wicked – but in those who have experienced the overwhelming greatness of

His goodness and forgiveness. This fear is an everlasting fear of God which the glorified saints in heaven will forever be in awe of the greatness of His goodness.

In the book of Acts we read that “the churches [had] rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied (Acts 9:31). This godly fear mentioned there cannot be opposed to the peace we have in Christ because it is joined here with the comfort of the Holy Spirit. The people walked in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. It should be our desire to have this fear of the Lord even as we rest secure in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. The Lord takes pleasure in them that fear Him and who hope in His mercy – and these are the people that God multiplies.

The Psalmist wrote, “The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever” (Psalm 19:9a) And so, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Corinthians 7:1). Let us not seek to be set free from the fear of God, for this fear is a characteristic of the Lord Jesus Christ to whom we must be conformed. As the author of Hebrews wrote, “Wherefore we [are] receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (Hebrews 12:28) Where godly fear is not in exercise, nothing is accepted with him. And therefore there can be no such thing as a perfected love which is divorced from godly fear.

And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, (Deuteronomy 10:12)

And this captures the blessed union of fear and love that characterized and yet characterizes the Lord Jesus Christ in all His perfection of holiness.

## The Blessing of the Fear of God

I began this study with a short survey showing the great decline in the teaching the fear of God which has befallen not only society but the church as well. This is no light matter – for where the godly fear of God is absent, even among those who profess to love the Lord and serve Him, there can be no true godly love of God.

Now I want to end with a survey of the blessings which come to those who fear the Lord.

The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant. (Psalm 25:14) Ye that fear the LORD, trust in the LORD: he is their help and their shield. (Psalm 115:11) The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the LORD shall be safe. (Proverbs 29:25) Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy; (Psalm 33:18) The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them. ... O fear the LORD, ye his saints: for there is no want to them that fear him. (Psalm 34:7, 9) Surely his salvation is nigh them that fear him; that glory may dwell in our land. (Psalm 85:9) For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. ... Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. ... But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children; (Psalm 103:11, 13, 17) He hath given meat unto them that fear him: he will ever be mindful of his covenant. (Psalm 111:5) He will fulfil the desire of

them that fear him: he also will hear their cry, and will save them. (Psalm 145:19) The LORD taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy. (Psalm 147:11).

Let us have grace, therefore, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear

Amen and amen.

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