

# TRUE FAITH IS TO OBEY GOD

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The Bible tells us that God is pleased with those who fear Him. Cornelius (Acts 10:35) is a very good example of such a person because he feared God, is accepted by God, and was personally sought by God. Therefore, we can say with certainty that anyone who believes in God, whether it be in the New Testament or in the Old Testament, is also a person who fears God. I wonder if you have ever noticed this.

Let us take the Lord Jesus as an example, to see how the Bible describes him:

<sup>1</sup> Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. <sup>2</sup> And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. <sup>3</sup> And he will delight in the fear of the LORD, and he will not judge by what his eyes see, nor make a decision by what his ears hear; (Isaiah 11:1-3 NAS)

## **An accurate understanding of “spirit”**

As you all know, this passage is a prophecy about Jesus Christ. Here, it speaks of the Lord Jesus as having the spirit of wisdom and understanding; the spirit of counsel and strength; the spirit of

knowledge and the fear of Yahweh. Does it mean that God gave Jesus several spirits?

Quite a few people have mistakenly thought that there are various “good spirits” in Jesus because they do not really understand what is meant by “the spirit of wisdom and understanding”; “the spirit of counsel and strength”; “the spirit of knowledge and the fear of Yahweh”. Since there are “good spirits”, there must surely be “bad spirits” as well. So, if we want to ask God for “good spirits”, then we need to drive out the “bad spirits”. Hence, some Christians, in interceding for others, will ask God to drive out various “bad spirits” (like the spirit of jealousy, the spirit of hatred, the spirit of lust, etc.) from those prayed for. Is this understanding, correct?

How should we understand Isaiah 11:1-3 then? I am concerned that when you do not quite understand what you are reading in the Bible, you would read your own understanding into it, bringing harm both to yourself and others. I have heard of people who have given such advice saying, “If you do not have joy in your heart, you can ask God to give you a joyful spirit. If you are lacking in strength, then you should ask God for a spirit of strength.” In like manner, we can ask God for all kinds of “good spirits”.

My hope in mentioning all these is that you will understand that this is not at all what the Bible means. So, how should we understand this passage then? The key lies in verse 2: “the Spirit of Yahweh will rest on him”. “The Spirit of Yahweh” is the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit — this is very different from the various “spirits” mentioned later. Verse 2 tells us that the Spirit of Yahweh God filled and led Jesus. Imagine if the Spirit of Yahweh God were to dwell in you, and you are fully obedient to His leading (just like

the Lord Jesus), what kind of person will you become? Your life will manifest wisdom, understanding, strength, counsel, knowledge, and the fear of God! Hence, these various “spirits” refer to different life qualities reflecting the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. These are like “fruit of the Spirit”, to put it in Paul’s terms.

Note that besides helping us to live lives that glorify Him, God gave us *His Spirit* to help us with a very important task, that is, to teach us to fear Him. In fact, this is the most important work that the Holy Spirit does in Man’s heart! This is something every Christian can experience. Many people were not sensitive towards sin before baptism but became especially sensitive afterwards. You will sense that there is a Spirit teaching you in your heart to fear God and depart from sin in every aspect of life. I wonder if you’ve ever experienced this. If you have experienced regeneration, you will understand what I am talking about. If you do not think there is much difference before and after baptism, then I would be very concerned about whether the Spirit of God is dwelling in you.

## **The Lord Jesus takes joy in fearing God**

The Lord Jesus is an excellent example. He not only has the spirit of the fear of God (the heart to fear God), but he also takes joy in fearing Yahweh (Isaiah 11:3). Have you ever thought of fearing God as joy? You will fully agree with this if you fear God. When I first started to learn to abide by God’s will, I sometimes found it to be difficult; but after putting it into action, I discovered that I had the power to overcome sin whenever I feared God and listened to His word. This kind of experience greatly encouraged me to be even more willing to fear God. Perhaps Christians will struggle

initially with fearing God, but they will gradually experience grace upon grace. They will experience that fearing God is in fact a joy. I found it to be true in my experience, hence, I constantly ask God to teach me to fear Him all my life.

A Christian who does not fear God will often sin, being constantly troubled in his conscience and without any joy to speak of. Even more pathetic is that they must show themselves to be full of joy when they come to church. This is a pitiable situation. I hope that brothers and sisters do not end up becoming such a person. If you fear God, you listen to His word, and you always maintain a clean conscience — why wouldn't you be joyful? The reason for being joyless is because you do not fear God and your heart is far too filthy.

Some Christians do not have joy because they have sinned. Yet, they do not want to confess and repent; hoping instead that the pastor will lay hands on them and pray for a “spirit of joy”. How can a Christian who does not fear God possibly have joy? The Bible already reminds us that, “There is no peace for the wicked” (Isaiah 48:22, 57:21). You must remember the words of the Bible. Only those who fear God can have confidence, with peace and joy in their hearts. Jacob addresses God as “the God of my father”.

“If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had not been for me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, so He rendered judgment last night.” (Genesis 31:42 NAS)

Notice how Jacob introduces the God he believes in. He calls God “the God of my father”. I too, hope that others will describe my relationship with God in this manner — beautiful! Will others address the God you believe in like that? If yes, thanks be to God!

Why did Jacob describe God in this manner? — Because that is what he observed from his father. Hence, he was witnessing to the fact that his father really feared God, and that he believed in the God whom his father feared. Would your children describe your God as such? I find this verse very encouraging! In the future, hopefully our children, friends, and family will fear God on our account.

So, how did Isaac fear God? Many Christians do not have much of an impression of Isaac and feel that there is nothing extraordinary about his faith. What is so commendable about Isaac? Is it his obedience to his father on the matter of marriage? Many had their parents arrange their marriage, so what is so great about this? What did Jacob see in his father, Isaac, that is worthy of such praise? There are not many accounts on Isaac. Let us look at Genesis 26:1-2:

<sup>1</sup> Now there was a famine in the land, besides the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. So Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines. <sup>2</sup> And the LORD appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land of which I shall tell you.” (Genesis 26:1-2 NAS)

I hope that when you read the Bible, you can immerse yourselves in the situation then. What do I mean by this? I hope that you can

see yourselves as Isaac, as if you were right there, experiencing what he was experiencing. This passage tells us that because of the famine, Isaac moved to Gerar. Isaac wasn't intending to stay in Gerar for long — he was only temporarily staying in Gerar on account of the famine. If the famine were to persist, he would have moved on to Egypt. Precisely because of this, God reminded him not to go to Egypt.

If Isaac obeyed God, it would mean that he would have to stay permanently in Gerar. And what are the implications of doing so? Try imagining this: If the people of Gerar themselves did not have enough to eat and drink because of the famine, how would they treat foreigners like Isaac and his family who had come to take up long-term residence there?

Why did the people of Gerar clash with Isaac over the wells (Genesis 26:17-21)? As water was scarce in that land, and sheep, cows, donkeys, camels and all the animals need drinking water and grass, finding water sources was key to the herdsmen's survival and expansion. Little wonder that they were so hostile towards Isaac! They thought that he had come to take over their resources. This is the reason why Isaac was so afraid of staying long-term in Gerar.

<sup>6</sup> So Isaac lived in Gerar. <sup>7</sup> When the men of the place asked about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," for he was afraid to say, "my wife," *thinking*, "the men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful." (Genesis 26:6-7 NAS)

Isaac didn't dare tell the locals that Rebekah was his wife because he was afraid it could bring fatal disaster upon him. We often criticize Isaac on this matter saying, "Why did God even care for this person who is so lacking in faith?" Actually, we have no idea about the circumstances Isaac was in. It was a time when Man and beast didn't have enough to eat. And as an outsider living off them, Isaac was constantly on tenterhooks. If you were Isaac, you would surely be in a great hurry to leave that place.

Of course, when conditions are favorable with abundant resources, nobody would mind a foreigner taking up residence amongst them — it doesn't hurt their interests to have just one more neighbor. You just take up your corner and that's it! But things are completely different in times of famine. Isaac was aware that other than having difficulty surviving, he would meet with many dangers if he didn't leave the place. That was why he thought of going to Egypt. Yet, at this very time, God reminded him not to go to Egypt (Genesis 26:2)! If God were to say this to you, what would you choose? — To leave or not?

Of course, things were different for Isaac and Abraham. God didn't stop Abraham from going to Egypt. Egypt was a place with abundant water supply. Therefore, when there was famine everywhere, everyone seeking to survive would think of going there. Imagine if you were Isaac, would you say to God, "Oh God, it's not very wise for me and my family to stay on in this place, is it?" During such times, would you still have faith (on account of the fear of God) to obey His word? Since God said so, Isaac obeyed despite feeling worried and afraid. Hence, Genesis 26:6 tells us: "So Isaac lived in Gerar."

In reading this, I cannot help but commend Isaac for his great faith in God! The locals bullied him around and discriminated against him (Genesis 26:14-16). He went through all that trouble to dig wells and they were repeatedly seized (Genesis 26:17-21). Though he wasn't yet in mortal danger per se, but even that was also unpredictable. However, because God so commanded him, he obeyed God and stayed in Gerar. This is how Isaac feared God.

Precisely because Jacob observed Isaac's conduct from young, it left a very deep impression on him — whenever Yahweh God said anything to his dad, he would obey; he really feared God. May those of us who are parents also leave such a good example for our children — even when you are no longer around, your children will constantly think of how you feared God. This is really the most precious heritage parents can leave for their children.

This is the reason why I said, Isaac's faith is greater than we thought. It is unfair of some Christians to be so critical of Isaac. They don't realize how great the testing was for him. God knew that Isaac faced extraordinary testing and was very gracious to him in not reproofing him for introducing his wife as his sister.

## **The Father of Faith offered up his son in the fear of God**

Let us look at the example of Abraham:

And he said, “Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” (Genesis 22:12 NAS)

The question we need to ask is: What is the relationship between obedience and the fear of God? — The answer is: Abraham obeyed God because he feared Him. This was also an expression of Abraham’s faith. How did Abraham show his fear of God in the matter of offering Isaac? Let us look at verses 1-3:

<sup>1</sup> Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” <sup>2</sup> And He said, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” <sup>3</sup> So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. (Genesis 22:1-3 NAS)

Verse 3 tells us that Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, took two servants and his son, and set off. Why the emphasis that it was “early”? Abraham set off early the next day — this shows that he didn’t delay in executing God’s command. We can ask ourselves what we would do if we heard God giving us the same command. I guess most people will pray to God asking Him to change His mind, hoping that the issue will go away after delaying a few days.

Let us say you offended someone in the church and God says to you, “This won’t do, you have to apologize to that person.” You struggle with it repeatedly that night and conclude that it is a loss of face to apologize. And so, you say to God, “God, if you give me

a sign tomorrow and allow me to bump into him, I will apologize. If I don't see him, I would take it that you don't want me to apologize anymore." Is this how you frequently treat God?

Having heard God's instructions, Abraham didn't dare delay and set out early in the morning. Isaac did not know why Abraham was bringing him to the land of Moriah. After he got to the sacrificial grounds, he asked his father, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (Genesis 22:7). Isaac knew that offering sacrifice warranted a lamb or a bull, but his father had only brought the wood without having prepared either. So, with what were they going to offer sacrifice? Little wonder that Isaac felt it to be strange. Obviously, Isaac was not in the know. Perhaps Abraham was concerned that it would be difficult to get away if his wife knew, so he didn't tell Sarah either.

From all these, we can see how much Abraham feared and obeyed God. He was determined not to let anyone or anything stop him from doing God's will! No wonder the angel said to him, "I know you fear God." He is truly worthy of being called the "Father of Faith" and becoming the model for our faith.

When people speak of "faith", they put the whole emphasis on belief and conviction. However, it is insufficient to highlight this one point. What is really most important is to fear God. A person who fears God will definitely trust and obey God. It is useless just to stress "belief" or "conviction" — without fear of God, it is impossible to trust God. The book of James warns us that even the demons believe in God and believe with greater conviction. Demons never doubt the reality of God, but you sometimes do.

However, demons only “believe” in God. They don’t obey God because they don’t fear Him. So, when the Bible speaks of Abraham’s faith, it is inseparable from his fear of God. And precisely because of his fear of God, he firmly believed and obeyed the word of God. Why did Isaac fear God? — Because he saw how Abraham, his father, really feared God. Hopefully when others think of us and see us, they would also see and learn the fear of God. I hope that we will rely on God’s grace to pass on the life that fears God.

## **Fear of God redeemed a brother**

Fear of God is most important. Whether God is pleased with us, and whether we can be a blessing to others, depend on whether we fear God. Many years ago, a preacher in America faxed me a letter that was meant for a brother in one of the churches and asked me to print it out. While helping him print this letter, I unintentionally saw the heading of the letter. It was addressed to the American Consulate, providing proof that this brother was a church pastor, for his application for an American green card. When I saw this, I felt that it was highly inappropriate. Even though this particular brother was very zealously participating in church ministry, he was not a pastor. Hence, I rang that preacher and said, “He is not a pastor — how can you give false information?” That preacher was very unhappy when he heard this, but I felt that I had the responsibility to remind him. When I handed the letter over to that brother, I said to him, “I unintentionally saw the content of the heading when I was printing this letter, and I feel that it’s very inappropriate as you are not a pastor. You shouldn’t ask someone to provide proof that doesn’t tally with the facts just to apply for a

green card.” This brother was also very unhappy when he heard this and left in a sullen mood. I felt compelled to speak up as this was a matter that reflected lack of fear of God, and I offended both of them by doing so.

This brother and his family later immigrated to America. Four years after his departure for the States, he returned to visit some relatives. The following day, he came to look for me with a whole bag of gifts. I found it to be very odd at the time. I thought that this brother would never contact me again after what happened. But he sought me out first thing on his return and he thanked me saying, “Pastor, thank you! Your reminder was of great help to me, even though I couldn’t take it at the time. Some things happened after that that finally woke me up.”

Like him, many Christians have no qualms sinning against God for fear of losing some benefit from the world. There were many run-ins between this brother and that preacher after he went to the States. When he saw that the preacher did many things against God’s will, he realized that, like him, he also did not fear God.

God enabled me to win this brother back. My reproof left a very deep impression on him, and he knew that I am a God-fearing person. His response proved that he had learned to fear God — if he didn’t fear God, he wouldn’t have come back to look for me. I like to deal with such Christians, regardless of who they are — what kind of education background, whether they are rich or poor. All these are unimportant. What is most important is their fear of God.

## Joseph kept away from temptation because he feared God

Let's look at another Old Testament example from Genesis 39:7-9:

<sup>7</sup> And it came about after these events that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me." <sup>8</sup> But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, with me *here*, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. <sup>9</sup> There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:7-9 NAS)

Everyone is very familiar with the story of Joseph. Put yourself in the same situation, and think about it: If you were Joseph, what would you do? Your master doesn't know that his wife has a liking for you; and now that his wife throws herself at you, there would be many "fringe benefits" as well; so, why not go along with her?

If you are a sister, what do you think if your boss wants to have a sexual relationship with you? If you get involved with the boss, there would naturally be lots of material gain — you are bound to be given a pay rise and lots of presents. If the boss is handsome on top of being rich, it is even more difficult to resist. For the worldly, it's a stroke of good fortune coming out of nowhere — so why not?

Joseph faced very severe testing. If he were to refuse, he would not only lose his job, but serious consequences even to the point of losing his life would follow. True enough, Joseph was falsely

accused by the wicked woman and sent to jail. This is how the world functions — the wicked, more often than not, will be the first to bring up a charge; but you don't have to fear — all you have to do is to devote yourself to fearing God. It is the same in the church — if you fear God and persist in doing God's will, Christians who do not fear God will slander and falsely accuse you of extremism and heresy. They feel compelled to slander you so as to defend their image, because your fear of God exposes their ungodliness. This is not something new in the church, but you don't have to be afraid because God knows everything.

Joseph said to his master's wife, "How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9) You see, having taken into account that it was his master's wife who threw herself at Joseph, with no one's knowledge, along with the fact that his master trusted him a lot, yet Joseph didn't dare to do evil and sin against God — this is fear of God!

If you think that you can do anything so long as you are not seen, then God is not in your heart at all. Those who have God in their hearts will surely be like Joseph, not daring to do things that those who don't fear God do. There is a cost to fearing God. Joseph, because he feared God, was falsely charged and imprisoned. But God was with him and caring for him all the way (Genesis 39:21, 23).

## **Noah built the ark because he feared God**

Let us look at yet another Old Testament example that everyone knows — Noah:

By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. (Hebrews 11:7 NIV)

Here, it says: “by faith Noah...in holy fear” — what does this mean? Firstly, we see that *faith* and *fear of God* are inseparable. Why? — Certainly, a person who trusts God is one who fears God. So, how did Noah come to be “in holy fear”? — After he heard God’s words, he gave serious thought to them, and diligently put them into action. This is what it means to be “in holy fear”. Do you have an attitude of reverence when you read the Bible?

Many envy Noah’s extraordinary experiences. But are you willing to be Noah? Think about it: He took 120 years to build an ark — doing just this one thing his entire life. What kind of life is this? All the neighbors would ask, “Hey, Noah, why are you building such a big ark?” Noah would tell them, “God told me that there’ll be a great flood.” And all who hear this would find it inconceivable. Perhaps some, out of superstition, will be afraid and start to help Noah build the ark. As time goes by, with no sign of floodwaters in sight, they then give up.

Take for instance a new believer who is very zealous but starts to doubt as time goes by, thinking, “Are the words of the Bible true?” People in Noah’s time faced a similar challenge. At the beginning when the ark was being built, they would be jittery, uncertain, with much speculation and a wait-and-see attitude thinking, “Is this for real? When will the floodwaters come?” But after 5 or 10 years, everyone would say, “Hey, this is impossible!” A few years more,

they would start laughing at Noah saying, “Hey, Noah! Why don’t you get a real job? Why spend so much time and energy to build an ark?” They would be gossiping about him and making fun of him.

When this gigantic ark was built, Noah’s hometown would have become somewhat of a tourist attraction [in modern terms] — all those who hear of it would visit and take a photo for remembrance. As one can imagine, life would have been hard for Noah. People at that time would have made this ark and Noah a laughingstock. Noah endured this for 120 years.

Do you often ask, “Will the Lord Jesus really come again?” Yes, all of us would like to know when the Lord Jesus will return. If we know the time and the hour of his return, we will surely prepare ourselves well. But with this time being indefinitely delayed, will you still be serious in your preparation? You would even start to doubt if he will ever return. Once there is doubt, will you still have the attitude of reverence towards God’s word?

The floodwaters took the people in Noah’s time by surprise, because they were waiting on the sidelines for 120 years thinking, “You see, Noah is really talking nonsense. It’s impossible that there would be a flood, so, let’s just eat, drink, and be merry!” They didn’t put the message that God spoke through Noah in their hearts and were not “in holy fear”. This is why the Lord Jesus warns us that people in the time of Noah were buying and selling, marrying and being given in marriage, eating and drinking, and when the floodwaters came, they were all taken by surprise.

Christians must be constantly alert, because the Lord Jesus reminds us to always be watchful and pray lest we be like the people of

Noah's time. We don't know when the Lord Jesus will return. Perhaps you are fed up with waiting and still the day of the Lord Jesus' return seems nowhere in sight. However, you must remember that Noah, on account of his fear of God, persisted in waiting for a lengthy 120 years. When the floodwaters came, all the people were taken by surprise and were drowned, but Noah and his entire family were saved.

All the great men of faith in the Bible shared one characteristic: fear of God. This is why God delighted in them. May we also imitate their fear of God and become people who truly have faith.

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