

DEUS NOSTER



REFUGIUM

FEAR IN FAITH

An Analysis of the Role Fear Should Play in Faith and Life

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There are many things that motivate human beings—from desires to incentives to emotions. Emotional motivators serve important roles in driving individuals to or from certain behaviors or situations, and fear is a strong example of this type of motivator.¹ Is that a good thing? Should we allow fear to take part in our decision-making processes and dictate our behaviors? This is a complicated question because fear is a complicated emotion. We can, however, indulge this inquiry by looking at biblical passages as well as figures from Christian history, namely the patriarch Abraham. Throughout his biblical narrative, Abraham, who is esteemed within Scripture as God's friend, the father of God's children, and one of his most faithful followers, exemplifies the correct balance of fear and faith.

This route of analysis will be helpful because Abraham's fear is reverential. A reverential fear not only means that Abraham has a deep respect and awe for God, but that he also holds a fear of separation from God. This is not, however, the only sense in which Scripture describes and employs fear.

In order to classify the position of fear in faith, it is important to differentiate between the various senses of the emotion. This variance is prevalent not only between Christians and the secular world, but also within Scripture itself. Scripture describes fear at an earthly level—recognizing the dangers that elicit terror—while also emphasizing the idea of reverential fear, which encompasses reverence, prudence, discipline, and compassion. Abraham displayed this emotion throughout his life, so

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psychologically examining Abraham will allow us to understand how fear drove his behaviors and interactions with others and, more importantly, with God. Apart from the Abraham of the Bible, I will explore how Abraham is characterized in the pseudepigraphal text, the Testament of Abraham. This testament is not recognized as Scripture, but it can be helpful for understanding the roles of faith and fear in the biblical Abraham's life by highlighting certain behaviors that are fueled by fear. Ultimately, I will examine these texts to show how exactly fear should play a role in faith and inform the Christian life.

FEAR AS A MOTIVATOR

Fear does not have one simple definition because it encompasses a spectrum of emotions. As defined above, fear in the Bible typically translates to a position of awe and reverence for God. In modern parlance, however, fear is more often associated with physiological changes, such as a racing heart, and it is elicited by some perceived danger.² This is a very powerful emotion, and it can be the driving force behind many behaviors in everyday life. And yet, does fear act as a healthy form of inspiration or as a harmful motivator? The answer depends on the actions following the fearful emotion. Take the fear of rejection as an example. This emotion is prevalent when an individual dreads social exclusion. This fear could easily become a detriment to a fulfilling life if it limits one from genuinely engaging with others. If the fear of missing out motivates one to accomplish righteous goals, however, then fear can be advantageous. It is clear that this emotion has a dual effect on our behaviors, so we must acknowledge the power that fear has over our lives and search to understand it.

This fear of rejection is not so different from the reverential fear described in Scripture, since both are associated with a desire to be seen and included. Reverential fear, however, is different precisely because it pertains to a relationship with the holy God. To understand how this fear works in faith, I will now present it in the context of Scripture, since these multiple expressions of fear do exist within Scripture itself.

I will first mention Proverbs, a book which seeks to “provide firm principles to guide us through life: not a set of dogmas or a book of laws, but precepts, norms and guidelines for securing a life of well-being, decency, and dignity.”³ These precepts, norms, and guidelines provide much practical advice for practical matters, but its aims of well-being, decency, and dignity are all ultimately motivated by a concern for a right relationship

with God—and a fear of how God may arise if one does not aim for well-being, decency, and dignity. In effect, all of Proverbs is guided by reverential fear.

Conversely, the book of Isaiah, an eighth-century BCE prophetic narrative which comments on the impending judgment of the nation of Israel and expresses hope for the coming Messiah, presents the more common understanding of fear. Here, God spoke to the prophet Isaiah saying, “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”⁴ Fear here does not point towards God, but rather to earthly things—God insists that his followers not be afraid of the dangers of the world because he is their protector. Whether the Bible reports a fear of God or a fear of earthly things, it still instructs its readers to look to God with reverence and respect. Therefore, fear in faith is not a completely separate concept from the common, root emotion of fear.

FEAR AND HEBREW SCRIPTURE

In order to fully explain these multiple impressions of fear within Scripture, I now turn to the original Hebrew. This can be helpful for understanding the biblical uses of fear because, as of 2020, the entire Bible has been translated into 704 languages and each of these translations have been interpreted in various ways.⁵ A philological study of the biblical Hebrew word for fear, therefore, may promise a clearer understanding of the spectrum and nuances of meaning of fear in Scripture.

In biblical Hebrew, *yârê'* is commonly rendered “to fear.”⁶ According to the Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, the simplest conjugation of *yârê'* can be broken down into three meanings: (1) to fear, be afraid, (2) to stand in awe of, be awed, and (3) to fear, reverence, honor, respect.⁷ These meanings are not divorced

from each other, but rather hold discrete significance in distinct contexts. For example, *yârê'* is used in the aforementioned verse, Isaiah 41:10, in terms of the first meaning—an earthly fear. Conversely, *yârê'* is translated in Jonah 1:9 and Isaiah 29:13 to mean “worship.” Furthermore, Genesis employs all three of these meanings—in Genesis 15:1 to speak of fear in the presence of God, in Genesis 26:7 to speak of being afraid of earthly consequences, and again in Genesis 42:18 to signify honor and respect for God. Each of these separate books within Scripture use the same Hebrew verb for fear, thus encompassing the spectrum of emotions, attitudes, and behaviors associated with the word.⁸ This places the Bible in a position to comment on fear and to specifically highlight the significance of fear in a relationship with God.

FEAR AND ABRAHAM

Now that I have established a definition for fear in its reverential biblical sense, I may analyze how it plays out in a biblical narrative. In the first book of the Bible, God singles out Abraham for his righteousness. God calls him to leave his country and people for a promised land that God sets aside for him, along with the promise that he will make Abraham into a great and blessed nation.⁹ Abraham places his trust in God, not wanting to be separated from him, despite not knowing anything about the land he is promised or how the journey to get there will be.

Later in Abraham’s life, God blesses him with a son, despite his wife’s apparent barrenness.¹⁰ Abraham’s son,



Isaac, is born as a symbol of God keeping his promises with his people. After a number of years, God tests Abraham’s faith by commanding that he sacrifice his son as a burnt offering.¹¹ Abraham obeys and binds his son on an altar for God, but God stops him before he can kill Isaac, saying, “Do not do anything to him. Now I

know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”¹² Here, the biblical Hebrew word for fear is the adjective *yārē*, which has the same spectrum of connotations as the verb *yārē*. Abraham’s fear here is specifically situated in the context of his relationship with God, thus making him a great candidate through which to study the role of reverential fear in faith.

As previously mentioned, Abraham is also a figure in the apocalyptic text the Testament of Abraham. The exact origin of this text is unknown. It is, however, suggested to be of either Jewish or Egyptian origin, dated around the latter part of the 1st century CE.¹³ This places it well after Genesis reached its final authoritative form.¹⁴ This indicates that the author would have been well aware of the Genesis stories that ultimately placed Abraham as a strongly venerated part of the Jewish cultural tradition. This text’s depiction, however, is an inversion of the well-known patriarch within Jewish literature. This is evident in Abraham’s behavior through the Testament in which his actions are in opposition to his typical steadfast faith described throughout Genesis. He is depicted as an old man who is fearful of his own mortality, leading him to disobey one of God’s commands. This is such a clear inversion of the ultimately faithful Abraham of Genesis, who bound his own son at the Lord’s command, that it cannot be taken as a serious critique on the character of Abraham.¹⁵ Rather, knowing that the author understood the true character of God’s Abraham, the Testament must have been written so as to clearly highlight the motivation that drives Abraham’s actions: fear.

This attitude of fear is, however, also seen in the biblical text. Throughout the history of Abraham in Genesis, many of his actions can be attributed to a heart motivated by fear. At the point when Abraham was instructed to kill his son, Isaac, Abraham obeyed God’s command out of fear because he understood God’s power and authority over him. Abraham knew that if he disobeyed God, it was within God’s power to separate himself from Abraham. This would have been distressing for anyone, but especially for a man who gave up his life and control over

his future for God. This representation of Abraham as fearful could be interpreted as a method of self-preservation, or what the reformer Martin Luther would refer to as “servile fear.”¹⁶ An alternate interpretation instead understands Abraham’s fear in this situation to be a reverential fear, or what Luther would call “filial fear”: he knows God’s power and trusts that God knows best for his children.¹⁷ Therefore, Abraham obeys God’s command. This is a fear born out of respect.

This raises the question posed by Howard Moltz, a professor of psychology at the University of Chicago: “was Abraham a man of faith, convinced that God would somehow keep the promise invested in Isaac, or was he a man of commandment, willing to obey God even at the cost of his beloved son?”¹⁸ This could be rewritten as: was Abraham a man acting out of filial fear, or was he a man controlled by servile fear? The former seems the most accurate choice, since Abraham is exalted in both the Old and New Testaments as a righteous and faithful man, and even specifically as God’s friend.¹⁹ Furthermore, if Abraham truly did act out of a heart of servile fear in all of these circumstances, does that discredit his righteousness? In the face of the Testament of Abraham, that seems unlikely. Fear is not a non-Jewish or non-Christian value. The idea that it is exemplified in Abraham, God’s faithful friend, points to the notion that fear is a recognizable trait amongst Christians; it does not create a gap between God and a believer, but it rather presents an opportunity for the Christian to learn to trust in him. The fact that Abraham acts out of a fear of God throughout Genesis indicates a strong faith and a healthy relationship between him and God, furthering Abraham’s identity as the revered progenitor of Judaism and Christianity. Just as the author of Hebrews states, “Abraham did everything by faith, which is the example that all Christians should strive to follow.”²⁰

FEAR IN FAITH

According to Proverbs 9:10, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”²¹ This verse makes it obvious that fear plays a role in the lives of Christians, but to what extent? And how can it be ascertained just how far fear should go in dictating decisions and influencing behaviors? The American Reformed Baptist pastor John MacArthur has discussed this verse, guided by questions like these. MacArthur emphasizes the first half of the verse, stating that “if you do not fear God, you do not have wisdom.”²² He further states what it means to have

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a fear of the Lord: “to fear God is to know Him as He is and respond accordingly.”²³ But what does the Bible suggest is the correct response? As I have already explored, Abraham’s response sought to prevent any divine disapproval because of his understanding of God’s character and power. Acting in this kind of fear leads to prudence, wholeness, compassion, and freedom, rather than groveling servitude. Christians are not meant to obey God’s commands out of trepidation of what may happen if they do not obey him. Instead, with a sense of deep respect for his majesty and goodness, Christians can obey out of trust that he knows what is best.

The final question remaining rests on the practicality of all of this. Abraham set an example that all Christians should follow—but how can we follow that example? What is needed to develop a healthy fear of God and then to act accordingly? According to Pastor David Lindell of James River Church in Missouri, it is relatively simple. He articulates the difference between Martin Luther’s servile fear and filial fear, clearly stating that “as Christians, servile fear is not what sustains us. It’s in Christ that we have filial fear. Your fear is not about the judgment of God, but rather a fear of being distant from Him.”²⁴ This is the differentiating feature between Abraham’s story and the stories of Christians today. Through Christ, God’s love, compassion, and mercy have been fully revealed. God’s implicit nature is still holy, righteous, just, and good, so believers still carry a fear of his judgment and stand in awe of his might. But in Christ, we can live out reverential fear with a heightened sense of joy and love. Through a relationship with Christ, we can achieve a strong trust in God, and act according to that trust, understanding that God has provided and will continue to provide because he will always act for our good. Christ can lessen the fear of distance from God because Christ brings us close to his side through his

sacrifice. With Christ, fear can sustain a healthy faith in God, as well as respect for God, thereby strengthening a relationship with the Creator of the universe. ✝

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9. Genesis 12 (NIV).
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12. Genesis 22:12 (NIV).
13. E.P. Sanders, “The Testament of Abraham,” in *Outside the Old Testament*, ed M. de Jonge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 56.
14. JVL Team, “Jewish Holy Scriptures: Canonization,” Jewish Virtual Library, 2004, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/canonization>.
15. To be clear, the Abraham of Genesis is hardly depicted in the text as perfect. There are multiple instances where he acts dishonorably, including lying about his wife’s relationship to him and attempting to bypass God’s plan for the birth of Isaac; cf. Genesis 16-18, 20 (NIV). In contrast to the Abraham depicted in the Testament of Abraham, however, whose righteousness is almost satirized, the Abraham of Genesis is shown to be ultimately faithful. Later New Testament writers including the author of Hebrews identify him as a person of faith.
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21. Proverbs 9:10 (NIV).
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