

"The fear of the Lord."

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There are Scripture principles of great importance which are woven into the whole fabric of the Bible without being at any point crystallized into a formal and definite statement. Take, for instance, what is said in the Old Testament concerning "the fear of the Lord." This expression is found throughout its entire range, but it particularly comes into prominence in Deuteronomy, wherein Moses deals with the moral condition of Israel, and also in the Psalms, in Proverbs, and in the later Prophets, where we have words of divine testimony to them in view of their decadence and failure. A survey of these and kindred passages would suffice, we believe, to convince anyone that there is a principle of Scripture which may be formulated somewhat as follows:

God pays comparatively little attention to outward position where there is not a corresponding inward condition, but lays great stress on inward condition.

Let us bring together four striking passages from the Old Testament, two from the Psalms, and two from the last of the Prophets.

1. The Secret.

"The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him; and He will show them His covenant." (Ps. 25: 14).

The whole of the Psalm is occupied in emphasizing the moral and spiritual condition which is well-pleasing to God. The humble confession of sin, confidence in God, meekness of spirit, and obedience to the divine testimonies, are the things dwelt upon. These things are of great price in the sight of God in all dispensations, as is shown by the fact that although written by David yet he looks on to the ultimate prevailing **of this** righteous and godly seed in the millennial age (ver. 13). These are the things to which God has regard to-day, and they are summed up in the expression "the fear of the Lord."

Now it is with those that fear the Lord that His secret is. God does not make known His mind and the secret of His ways, nor admit to the intimacy of friendship all His children, and much less the world. Every child of God has the same standing in grace, and enjoys the same life, relationship, and favour, but by no means all enjoy the same intimacy of communion. To know the mind of God one thing is needful, and this is not outward standing, or correct position, or erudite acquaintance with Scripture, but a spirit and a life saturated with the fear of God.

Scripture affords us many an illustration of this. Lot was accounted righteous equally with

Abraham, but he was never called, as Abraham was, "the friend of God." While the latter was let into the secret of what God was about to do to Sodom, the former knew nothing of it until the last moment.

An even more striking example is afforded by the contrast between the opening chapters of Matthew and Luke. At the moment when the greatest event in Israel's history was impending Jerusalem as a whole was wrapped in ignorance and indifference. Not only pleasure-loving Herod but also priests, and Scribes well-versed in the law, and religious Pharisees were totally unconscious that the long-promised Messiah had been born in their midst. The first intimation of this reached them through wise men from the East, who were aliens from Israel's commonwealth and strangers from the covenant of promise.

Worse than this, when they did know, months, apparently, *after* the event had transpired, they were able glibly enough, and correctly enough, to quote Scripture as to the place of Messiah's birth, and then proceeded to use their scriptural knowledge in attempting to encompass His death !

Such were the men who at that time gloried in outward position.

Luke's Gospel opens amidst quite different scenes. We are introduced to the cottages of the humble in Galilee- to people unknown to fame and without standing in the world, and we find they were speaking inspired words about Messiah's birth months *before* He came. And further, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem there were certain shepherds -godly men but of the humblest type, mere night watchmen for the flocks- and by angelic intervention they knew of the joyful event not many minutes after it was an accomplished fact.

How great is this contrast! The men of pedigree and position thoroughly blind-the men with nothing but the fear of the Lord thoroughly conversant with the secret of the Lord.

2. The Banner.

"Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee, that it may be displayed because of the truth" (Ps. 60: 4).

The setting of this verse is distinctly warlike. The whole context speaks of conflict. Defeat marks the opening verses, and, through God's intervention, victory marks the close.

Now if, through a reverse sustained, a host is in danger of degenerating into a rabble and yet is transformed into a force which can be carried to victory, it must be by some rallying standard being raised. Hence the raising of such a banner was the form God's intervention took.

The varying fortunes of David's contests with Syrians and Edomites gave the occasion of these words being penned, but they by no means exhausted their meaning. The banner of truth abides through all the pilgrimage conflicts of God's saints, and it is for *display*. A secret is something to be cherished which in its very nature is suitable for the ears of *some* and not of *all*; a banner, on the other hand, is in its nature the uplifting of some inscription which *everybody* is to see whether they take it to heart or not.

TRUTH, then, like a banner is to be displayed aloft; but whose hands are to hold it? The hands of "*them that fear Thee.*" No others.

It has ever been thus. We have but to turn again to those early chapters in Luke to find illustrations of it.

No sooner had the shepherds set eyes on the infant Messiah than they began to testify of Him

(Luke 3: 17, 18). When Anna the prophetess beheld Him she at once went forth and "spake of Him to all them that looked for redemption in Israel" (Luke 3: 38). Thus was the banner raised, though only in a very restricted circle at first.

Again, the early part of Acts is the history of the raising of the banner of truth by "unlearned and ignorant men," who nevertheless "had been with Jesus," to the total discomfiture of those who claimed priestly succession and powers. The latter part shows the banner carried by Saul into the Gentile world and maintained aloft in spite of the fiercest opposition from men of the same stamp.

When we reach the Epistles we find the same Apostle passing on the banner not to men marked by occupying a certain position; not to elders or deacons or men of gift as such, but to Timothy, who was marked above others by an inward condition according to God.

It was of Timothy that Paul had previously written, "I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state" (Phil. 2. 20), and that word "likeminded" we must connect not merely with Paul's own example as given in verse 17, but with the infinitely greater example of Christ Himself as given in verses 5 to 8. Timothy was a man in whom in special measure dwelt "the mind which was in Christ Jesus," and hence to him was given Paul's farewell injunction, "Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of the Lord" (2 Tim. 1: 8), and again, "Preach the word" (2 Tim. 4: 2).

The banner of "the testimony of the Lord" was handed-we repeat-by Paul the veteran not to a class or band of men marked by a certain outward position, but to one marked by a certain inward condition, one who possessed indeed the mind of Christ.

This excellently illustrates our theme and is most applicable to our own days.

3. The Book.

"Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name" (Mal. 3: 16),

The book of Malachi affords us the closing glimpse, as far as the Old Testament is concerned, of the Jews who had left the lands of their captivity and returned to Jerusalem. It also gives us the first intimation of the state of things which developed, revealing the truehearted remnant amidst the self-satisfied leaders and people. The opening chapters of Luke, to which we have already alluded, fit naturally on to the end of Malachi, showing us still a "remnant according to the election of grace." We may assuredly take it for granted that such a remnant was never wanting all through the 350 to 400 years that elapsed between the two.

The very feature that we are dwelling upon stands right to the forefront. Their characteristic feature was "the fear of the Lord." Their minds were occupied with Him, for they "*thought* upon His name," *i.e.* they pondered over all that He had revealed Himself to be, and they cared for His reputation in keeping with that. Their *mouths* were occupied with His word, for they "*spake* often one to another," and their words met with divine approval, "the Lord hearkened and heard it," so that evidently their communications were "good to the use of edifying." Further, their *activities* had God as their end and object, for it speaks of "the righteous . . . him that *serveth* God."

Who these good people were we have no possible means of knowing. They were utterly unknown to fame in the day in which they lived. The prominent people of those days were the priests who were the feeble and deplorable representatives of the once glorious hierarchy established by God. These men

had set themselves down in Moses' seat, they were proud, and men called them happy (Mal. 3: 15). Nevertheless they were crushingly rebuked by the Lord through the prophet. They who "feared the Lord" alone were approved.

And for these the "book of remembrance" was written before the Lord. Their record is on high, to be produced when the earth-recorded histories of the proud are as though they had never been; and not only is their record secure but they themselves are to be displayed as the special treasure of the Lord in the day of the Kingdom that is coming. They "shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book." This is predicted in Daniel 12: 1 of the godly seed whose lot it will be to go through the great tribulation in the last days.

It seems pretty evident, from such a scripture as Revelation 3: 7-11, that the book of remembrance is still in use and that in it still are being entered the records of such as fear the Lord and think upon His name-*i.e.* those characterized by a certain condition rather than by holding a certain position.

4. The Sun.

"But unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall" (Mal. 4: 2).

Under this striking figure we have the promise of the appearing of the Lord. He is the *Sun*, *i.e.* the centre, the source of light and warmth of authority and rule and power. He is the Sun of *righteousness*, since appearing in a scene of moral chaos and unrighteousness, *that* must necessarily be His outstanding characteristic.

But when He arises as the Sun of righteousness will it not be for all? Truly; but He will not arise for all *with healing in His wings*. To many His arising will mean the very reverse of that. He will arise with fierce and scorching heat: "For behold the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and *all the proud*, yea, and all that do wickedly shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of Hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch" (Mal. 4: 1). He will arise "with healing in His wings" *only* for those that fear His name.

It is highly significant that here in the closing words of the Old Testament we get the two classes not only so clearly distinguished, but so definitely labelled-"you that fear My name," on the one hand, and "the proud," on the other. Significant for this reason, that here at the finish we get clearly revealed the tendency inevitably manifested in the career of those who lay stress on position rather than condition. It ends, it always has ended, and ever will end, in *pride*. That feature which of all others is most hateful to God.

To lay primary stress on outward position, while relegating questions of spiritual condition to a secondary place, necessarily tends in this direction, since one is then occupied with certain external privileges and points of advantage-whether real or imaginary-in which one can boast, **while** **considerations** of one's own definite state or lowly condition which would humble are thrust out of sight.

To lay primary stress on inward condition and to put outward position into a secondary place has the reverse effect. It produces the lowly and humble mind of great price in God's sight-such a spirit as we see, for instance, in the greatest woman who has ever walked this earth, in Luke 1: 46 to 55 (particularly verse 48).

In her case, she became the mother of the Messiah, and thus "the dayspring from on high" visited

the poor of Jehovah's flock. As "the Sun of righteousness" He will yet arise in glory for the vindication and blessing of those that fear Him.

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Perhaps two words of explanation may be added. By "outward position" we do not mean the new standing of the believer in Christ nor any of those heavenly and divine relationships into which he is brought. They are of course of *primary* importance, and the knowledge and enjoyment of them is that which alone will rightly form and maintain a right "inward condition" with any of us.

And further, there is no intention by the foregoing to decry "outward position" as though it were a matter of *no* importance. Our object has been to simply show from Scripture what is its *relative* importance, and to put first things first in our minds.

The reminder of it is needed, we venture to think, and never more needed than *today*.