

The Terror of Unanswered Prayer

By: Keith Keyser

*“When your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. **Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer;** they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord: They would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. But whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil.” Prov. 1:27-33ⁱ*

Alluding to the words of Revelation 6:16, the classic hymn, “The Love of God” says: “When years of time shall pass away/and earthly thrones and kingdoms fall/when men who here refuse to pray/ on rocks and hills and mountains call/God’s love so sure shall still endure all measureless and strong...”ⁱⁱ This haunting stanza reminds one that a fearful day of judgment will one day overtake this planet. Disbelieving creatures, now heedless of the danger to their souls, will then cry out for mercy, but it will be too late. By contrast, believers will never come into condemnation and possess the settled assurance that God hears and answers their prayers. One must weigh the difference between the saved and the lost in regard to prayer.

Wisdom Weighs In

Proverbs frequently uses the literary device of personification (i.e. “An imaginary or ideal person conceived as representing a thing or abstraction.”)ⁱⁱⁱ The book opens with Wisdom entreating “the simple” and “fools” to repent of their scornful repudiation of knowledge and glean understanding from her (Prov. 1:20-24.) Although Wisdom is an abstract concept, the One “in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden,” embodies its characteristics (Col. 2:3.) Thus, in the passage Wisdom is a stand-in for the Lord’s opinion – much like Proverbs 8:12-36.

Wisdom takes umbrage with the unrighteous because “they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord. They would none of my counsel; they despised all of my reproof” (Prov. 1:29-30.) The “fear of the Lord” is certainly a foreign concept to modern people. To acknowledge a Higher Being to whom they are beholden is odious to skeptical men and women. “Question Authority” is still the mantra of many, and they reject any notion of a God whom we need to fear. Henley’s poem may be over-quoted in Christian Apologetic literature, but the lines still record the sentiment of contemporary mankind: “It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishment the scroll, **I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.**”^{iv}

Of course, the Lord is not like the pagan deities, fetishes, and demons that so often inspire terror-stricken adherents to acts of barbarism. People fear those sorts of false gods because they threaten their devotees with curses, spells, bad luck, and the like. Such caricatures of the Almighty offer nothing but craven capitulation to blind slavery. By contrast, the True and Living God inspires love, because He first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19; Rom. 5:8.) He also empowers us to live holy lives by His indwelling Spirit (Gal. 5:16-18, 22-23; Rom. 8.)

There is a proper “fear of the Lord,” which refers to believers’ respect for the awesome power and majesty of God. As one defines it: “Encompassing and building on attitudes of awe and reverence, it is the proper and elemental response of a person to God. This religious fear of God is a major biblical image for the believer’s faith. In fact, there are well over a hundred references to the fear of God in the positive sense of faith and obedience.”^v Psalm 19:9 describes it in these words: “The fear of Jehovah is clean, enduring for ever: The ordinances of Jehovah are true, and righteous altogether.” The Lord is pure and just, and fearing Him does not inspire debauchery, brutality, or the other forms of wickedness that are so common in fearful pagan adoration. The biblical fear of God is closely associated with worship. As one writer puts it: “True worship is **reverential fear** that discourages disobedience on the one hand and encourages obedience to God on the other hand.”^{vi}

Prayerlessness Is Next To Godlessness

The fear of the Lord is entry level truth to gathering Wisdom’s treasures. If one refuses to reverence their Maker, they will be shut out from the enlightenment that He provides to His followers. Instead of the fear of God, “...fear cometh as a storm, and your calamity cometh on as a whirlwind...distress and anguish come upon you” (Prov. 1:27.) Since they rejected Wisdom’s counsel, they are left to reap the fruit of their misguided decisions (vv. 29-31.) They refuse to pray when God offers Himself in grace, only to have their prayers go unheeded when wrath overtakes them. Speaking as Wisdom, the Lord unequivocally says: “...they call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but they shall not find me” (v. 28.)

What a terrible thing it is to have the Lord turn away from one’s prayer. To realize too late one’s need, and to be shut up to the bad decisions one has made. Billions will find to their cost that prayer is no vain pursuit. Rather, one who now calls on God in fear for their eternal soul and asks Him to save them based on the sacrifice and work of the Lord Jesus Christ will never be turned away (Jn. 6:37.) Seeing oneself as a hell-bound, wrath-deserving sinner, who cannot by any means save oneself, one turns in repentance and faith to the Savior, asking Him for new life and turning oneself over to Him. “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom. 10:13.)

On the other side of the coin, believers are assured that God hears and answers their prayers. 1 John 5:14-15 teaches the beautiful effectiveness of believing prayer according to the will of God: “And this is the boldness which we have toward Him, that, if we ask anything according to His

will, He heareth us: and if we know that He heareth us whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions which we have asked of Him.” Thus, the early church devoted themselves to prayer and Paul asked for the intercession of believers (Acts 2:42; 1 Thes. 5:17, 25.) Contrary to the anxiety of the godless mentioned in Proverbs 1, believers enjoy God’s peace by bringing their requests and thanksgiving to Him (Phil. 4:6-7.) Christians ought to enter into this blessed access in prayer multiple times of day. Moreover, the local church prayer meetings ought to be overflowing with saints, who are passionately and freely interceding and supplicating the Lord on behalf of themselves and others. Sadly, all too often it is the few, rather than the many, who engage in this high and holy work.

ⁱ All verses in this article are taken from *The American Standard Version, 1901* (ASV)

ⁱⁱ Frederick M. Lehman, “The Love of God”, accessed on 8/6/09 at:
<http://www.cyberhymnal.org/html/l/o/loveofgo.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “Personification” - point “b”, Oxford University Press, 2nd edition (1989), electronic edition.

^{iv} William Ernest Henley, “Invictus,” accessed on 8/6/09 at: <http://www.constitution.org/col/invictus.htm>

^v Ryken, Leland ; Wilhoit, Jim ; Longman, Tremper ; Duriez, Colin ; Penney, Douglas ; Reid, Daniel G. “Fear of God,” *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. electronic ed. Downers Grove, IL : InterVarsity Press, 2000,, S. 277.

^{vi} S.E. Porter, “Fear of God,” *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin & Peter H. Davids. Downers Grove, IL : InterVarsity Press, 2000, electronic ed.