



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States Monthly Message for the Monastic

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On The Fear of God

The Fear of God is the beginning of virtue, and it is said to be the offspring of faith. It is sown in the heart when a man withdraws his mind from the attractions of the world to collect its thoughts, wandering about from distraction, into reflection upon the restitution to come.¹

If a man wishes to attain to the love of God, he must have fear of God. Fear gives birth to mourning, and mourning to courage. When all this has ripened in the soul, it begins to bear fruit in all things. And, seeing these beautiful fruits in the soul, God draws it to Himself, like choice incense, takes joy in it with His Angels for all time, fills it with rejoicing, and protects it in all its ways, to let it reach its place of rest without harm. Then, seeing the Most High Guardian encompassing it, the devil no longer attacks it; indeed he fears to come near it owing to this great power. Obtain this power that the demons may fear you, your labors be light and Divine things a sweet joy. This sweetness of Divine love is far sweeter than honey. Many monks and virgins, living in communities, having had no taste of this Divine sweetness nor received Divine power, have thought that they had it already. But, since they had made no effort to gain it, God did not give it to them. He who strives to obtain it will surely gain it through God's mercy; for God is no respecter of persons. When a man wishes to have in himself the light of God and His power, and so disregards both the abuse and the honors of this world, hates all things of the world and ease of the body, and purifies his heart of all bad thoughts, when he unceasingly brings to God fasting and tears day and night, as well as pure prayers, then God enriches him with that power. Strive to obtain this power – and you will do all your works with calm and ease, will receive a great daring towards God and He will grant all that you ask.²

The fear of God is twofold; in beginners and in the perfect. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Come, your children, hear me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord. By the fear of the Lord men depart from evil, and where there is fear, there the Commandments are kept. The beginning of the true life in man is the fear of God: but it cannot bear to remain in the soul with dispersed thoughts. Strive to make fear

¹ Saint Isaac The Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies (Holy Transfiguration Monastery), Homily 1, P. 113

² St. Anthony the great

of God serve as the foundation of your progress, and in a few days, you will find yourself at the doors of the kingdom, without wandering on the way. On the second perfect fear of God it is written, blessed is the man that fears the Lord, that delights greatly in his commandments.³

There are, as St. Basil states, three stages by which we can be pleasing to God. The first, is that of fearing punishment. This makes us worthy and we are in the place of slaves. The second, the state of slaves working for money, fulfilling orders for our gain, and by so doing earning our hire. The third is the state of sons, where we struggle for the highest good. Because a son, when he becomes mature, does his father's will not on account of fear of being beaten, nor to obtain a reward from him, but rather because he knows that he is loved. He loves and honors his father, and he is sure that all his father's goods are his own. Such a one is worthy to hear, "You are no longer a slave, but a son, an heir of God through Christ." As we have said before, he ceases to fear God with that initial fear, but truly loves him, and so St. Anthony declares, "I no longer fear God." And the Lord said to Abraham after the offering of his son, "Now I know that you fear God." This is a sign that perfect fear is produced from love. What does he refer to in saying, "Now I know?" Abraham was generous, he did many things, at the command of God. He obeyed God and did not spare his only son. He drifted from place to place in a strange land among a people that were idolatrous, where there was no fear of God, and above all this he endured the fearful test of offering up his only son. After these things, God said to him, "Now I know that you fear God." Plainly he meant that perfect fear which is a property of the saints. So no longer by fear of punishment nor to obtain a reward do they do the will of God, but with love they are afraid to do anything separate from the will of the Beloved, and thus he states, "Love casts out fear." No more do they act from fear, but they fear instead out of love. This, then is perfect fear, but perfect fear cannot come about if a man does not have that initial fear. Because scripture states, "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord." And again, "The beginning and the end is the fear of God." He calls the beginning that initial fear which is the final perfect fear, which belongs to the saints. The initial fear is of our own state. This preserves the soul, like coating. As it is written, "By the fear of the Lord every man turns away from evil." If all men turn from evil on account of fear of punishment, as a slave who is afraid of his lord, he does some good, and starts to hope for a recompense for his good deeds just as a hired servant.

When then, he continues in fleeing from evil, as we say, on account of fear as a slave, and doing good from hope like a hired slave, spending time with God, and also being joined to God, he finally tastes and comes to a certain experience of goodness and no longer desires to be apart from it. "Because who," says the Apostle, "is able to divide himself from the love of Christ?" Then he achieves the state of a son, and loves goodness for its own sake and fears since he loves. And this is the great and mature fear. For this cause the prophet instructs us about the difference in this fear and says, "Come, my children, hearken to me and I will teach you the fear of the Lord." Fix your minds on this saying of the prophet. See how every word has its force. First, he says, "Come to me," call on us to come to virtue. And he adds, "Children."

³ Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the heart.

The saints call "children" those who are converted by their words from evil ways to virtue. As the Apostle states, "Children of whom I am in labor again until Christ is formed in you." Then after calling us to him and pushing us on to this conversion he states, "I will give instruction about the fear of the Lord." Consider well the saint's boldness. When we desire to say something about the spiritual life, we always declare, "Do you wish to discuss and reveal something concerning the fear of God or some other virtue?" But he acts differently and boldly says, "Come children, hearken to me, and I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Who is the man who desires life and loves to see good days?" Then as though someone answered, "I do, teach me how to live and to see good days." He sets out to teach him saying, "Refrain your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile." See then he cuts off the source of evil by the fear of God. To keep your tongue from evil. That is do not offend the conscience of your neighbor with anything and do not speak evil or be irritable. "And your lips that they speak no trickery." That is, do not speak in order to trick your neighbor. Then he enjoins, "Turn away from evil." Initially he speaks of certain sins, backbiting and trickery. Then he goes on to speak universally of all sins. "Turn from evil." That is to say, flee from all evil and turn from all things that lead to vice. Nor again does he just say that and then keep quiet, but he enjoins, "and do good." Because it can happen that although a man does no wrong, he nevertheless does no good. When a man does not hurt anyone, he does not, however, show mercy when he does not hate, for he does not love. Then, quite well, the Prophet says, "Turn from evil and do good." See how he reveals the consequence of the three states of which we spoke of earlier. How by the fear of God we are led by the hand to reject evil and so we come to be joined with goodness. Because if a man is worthy to reject evil and to flee from it naturally, he can work good things, being led on the way by the example of the saints. Having said this, he leads on to its consequences, saying also, "Seek peace and pursue it." Not satisfied with only saying, "seek it," he adds, "run after it quickly, so that you might grab hold of it."

Now we have heard what the perfect fear of the saints is and what is the initial fear that belongs to our humble state, how we can get away from it, and where we come to by the fear of God. At last, we yearn to understand how the fear of God occurs, and to do this we must say what it is that pushes us away from the fear of God. The fathers tell us that one achieves the fear of God by retaining the thought of death in one's mind; by recalling the everlasting punishment; by studying his actions that day every evening, and every morning studying his behavior at night; never allowing his tongue to have free rein; and keeping nearby someone who has the fear of God as his spiritual father. One time a brother said to one of the elders, "What will I do, O Father, that I should learn to fear the Lord?" And he said, "Go and become a disciple of a man who has the fear of the Lord and from his fear of the Lord, you will learn to fear the Lord." We drive away the fear of the Lord when we do the opposite. That is when we do not recall our death, or tortures, and we do not give heed to our state, or study how we spend our time, but we abide apathetically being occupied with various things, gratifying our freedom, and being self-indulgent, which is the worst of all of them, for this is perfect ruin. What drives away the fear of the Lord so well as satisfying our desires? So when Abba Agathon was asked about self-indulgence he said that it is like a great fire which when it burns up, men flee and the fruits of the trees around it are

completely destroyed. O Good Lord, you know the strength of this passion and its ruination. And when he was again asked, "Is it really so dangerous?" He said, "Yes there is nothing which is more hazardous than self-indulgence. It readies the soil for all the vices for it drives out from the soul the fear of God." ⁴

This fear is granted as a gift to the person who turns to God through faith. It is a type of enlightenment, and a reflection of faith. It is the result of Divine Grace. A person who has this fear of God in their heart stands in reverence before God's greatness, and realizes their own spiritual poverty. It is this profound respect and awe (the fear of God) that motivates the soul to devote one's whole being to God, the Creator of All. Like the sun's rays passing through a crack and lighting up the house, show up even the finest dust, the fear of the Lord on entering the heart of a man show up all his sins. Let us sing with the psalmist and say nail Your fear to my flesh, after all what can be greater and more perfect than the fear of God? Nothing, of course. St. Gregory the Theologian said: 'the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. For where there is fear, there the Commandments are kept; where the Commandments are kept, there the flesh is purified; where the flesh is purified, there the light Springs forth, and the shining of the light fulfills desire above all desires. May the Lord grant to us all His divine fear

⁴ Discourses of Dorotheos of Gaza