

The Fear of the Lord as Loving God

Michael Barber, Ph.D. / John Paul the Great Catholic University © 2012

www.JPCatholic.com / www.TheSacredPage.com

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (Proverbs 1:7)

And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of *wisdom* and *understanding*, the spirit of *counsel* and *might/fortitude*, the spirit of *knowledge* [and *piety*]¹ and *the fear of the LORD*. (Isaiah 11:2)

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil,¹⁵ and deliver all those *who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.*” (Hebrews 2:14–15)

The “Riddle” of Genesis

The account of the fall in Genesis 3 *uses figurative language*, but *affirms a primeval event*, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man.² Revelation gives us the certainty of faith that the whole of human history is marked by the original fault freely committed by our first parents³—*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 390.

The Creation and Priestly Duty of Adam

⁷Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and *breathed into his nostrils the breath of life*; and man became a living being. ⁸And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. . . . ¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to *till* [Heb. *abad*] it and *keep* [Heb. *shamar*] it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for *in the day that you eat of it you shall die.*” (Genesis 2:7–8, 15–16)

“And [the Levites] shall keep [*shamar*] his charge, and the charge of the whole congregation before the Tabernacle of the congregation to do [*abad*] the service [*abodah*] of the Tabernacle. ⁸ And they shall keep [*shamar*] all the instruments of the Tabernacle of the congregation and the charge of the children of Israel to do [*abad*] the service [*abodah*] of the Tabernacle” (cf. also Num 8:26; 18:5-6; also see Num 17:12-18:6).

“And on that day when Adam went out from the garden of Eden, *he offered a sweet-smelling sacrifice.*” (*Jubilees* 3:27)

The Serpent

Now *the serpent* [Heb. *nabash*] was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’”² And the woman said to the *serpent*, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; ³but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, *neither shall you touch it, lest you die.*”⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “*You will not die.*” (Genesis 3:1–4)

¹ Added in the Septuagint.

² Citing Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* 13 § 1.

³ Citing Council of Trent: DS 1513; Pius XII: DS 3897; Paul VI: AAS 58 (1966), 654.

Understanding the Serpent

Then the LORD sent fiery *serpents* [Heb. *nabash*] among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.⁷ And the people came to Moses, and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD, that he take away the *serpents* from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”⁹ So Moses made a bronze *serpent*, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze *serpent* and live. (Numbers 21:6–9)

In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish *Leviathan the fleeing serpent*, *Leviathan the twisting serpent*, and he will slay *the dragon* that is in the sea. (Isaiah 27:1)

And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars;² she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery.³ And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, *a great red dragon*, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. . . .⁷ Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and *the dragon and his angels fought*,⁸ but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.⁹ And *the great dragon* was thrown down, that *ancient serpent*, who is called *the Devil and Satan*, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. (Revelation 12:1–3; 7–8)

Why did Adam fail?

“You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. *He was a murderer from the beginning*, and has nothing to do with the truth, because *there is no truth in him*.” (John 8:44)

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil,¹⁵ and deliver all those *who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage*.” (Hebrews 2:14–15)

What was Adam’s sacrifice *supposed to be*?

The Breath of God as God’s Grace

1. No similar description of other living creatures (they only have *natural* life)
2. Man was created to share in the *life* and *nature* of God
3. The test is tied to what grace is
4. Grace: God’s life living in man

“This grace of original holiness was ‘to share in . . . divine life’.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 375)

“Grace is a participation in the life of God . . .” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1997)

The Trinitarian Life of God

“He who does not love does not know God; for *God is love*. . .” (1 John 4:8)

“All that the Father has is mine.” (John 16:15)

“The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is *the central mystery* of Christian faith and life. It is *the mystery of God in himself*. It is therefore *the source of all the other mysteries of faith*, the light that enlightens them. It is *the most fundamental and essential teaching* in the ‘hierarchy of the truths of faith.’”⁴ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 234)

⁴ Citing the *General Directory for Catechesis* 43.

The Sign of the Cross

“Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “*Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!*” And having said this he breathed his last.” (Luke 22:46)

Christ’s Priesthood and Our Priesthood

“For every high priest is appointed *to offer gifts and sacrifices*; hence *it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer.*” (Hebrews 8:3–4)

“The baptized have become ‘living stones’ to be ‘built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood’ [1 Pet 2:5]. By Baptism they share in the priesthood of Christ, in his prophetic and royal mission. They are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that [they] may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called [them] out of darkness into his marvelous light’ [1 Pet 2:9]. *Baptism gives a share in the common priesthood of all believers.*” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1268)

“I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to *present* [Gk. *paristēmi*] your *bodies as a living sacrifice*, holy and acceptable to God, which is *your spiritual worship.*” (Romans 12:1)⁵

Pope Benedict on Fear of the Lord

“... the Psalmist invites every member of the faithful to cultivate ‘fear of the Lord’ [Ps 111 [110]: 10], the beginning of true wisdom. It is *not fear and terror* that are suggested by this word, *but serious and sincere respect* which is *the fruit of love, a genuine and active attachment to God the Liberator.*”—Pope Benedict XVI⁶

Fear of the Lord as Loving God

“Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the ordinances which the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it;² *that you may fear the LORD your God*, you and your son and your son’s son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life; and that your days may be prolonged.⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD;⁵ and *you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* . . .¹³ You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve him, and swear by his name. (Deuteronomy 6:1–5, 13)

“And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but *to fear the LORD your God*, to walk in all his ways, *to love him*, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,¹³ and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I command you this day for your good?” (Deuteronomy 10:12–13)

“*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.* . . .²¹ He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”²² Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?”²³ Jesus answered him, “*If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*”²⁴ He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.” (John 14:15, 21–24)

⁵ The word *paristēmi* is used in other contexts describing sacrificial worship (see, e.g., LXX Deut 10:8; 17:12; 18:5, 7; 21:5).

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience on Psalm 110 [111], June 8, 2005 [no. 4]:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20050608_en.html

“So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and *he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.* ¹⁷ In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so are we in this world. ¹⁸ *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love.* ¹⁹ *We love, because he first loved us.*” (1 John 4:16–19)

St. Hilary of Poitiers (d. A.D. 368) on Fear of the Lord

“Fear” is not to be taken in the sense that common usage gives it. Fear in this ordinary sense is the trepidation our weak humanity feels when it is afraid of suffering something it does not want to happen. We are afraid, or are made afraid, because of a guilty conscience, the rights of someone more powerful, an attack from one who is stronger, sickness, encountering a wild beast, suffering evil in any form. This kind of fear is not taught: it happens because we are weak. We do not have to learn what we should fear: objects of fear bring their own terror with them.

But of the fear of the Lord this is what is written: “*Come, my children, listen to me, I shall teach you the fear of the Lord*” [Ps 34:11]. The fear of the Lord has then to be learned because it can be taught. It does not lie in terror, but in something that can be taught. It does not arise from the fearfulness of our nature; it has to be acquired by obedience to the commandments, by holiness of life and by knowledge of the truth.

For us the fear of God consists wholly in love, and perfect love of God brings our fear of him to its perfection. Our love for God is entrusted with its own responsibility: to observe his counsels, to obey his laws, to trust his promises.⁷

Do Not Be Afraid!

²⁸ *And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.* ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will.

³⁰ But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ *Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.* ³² So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; ³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:26–33)

⁷ Ps 127, 1-3; CSEL 24, 628-630.