

THE FEAR OF THE LORD PART III: MORE FEAR OF GOD THAT DISPLEASES GOD
Isaiah 48:17-19

(NASB) "Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, 'I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go. ¹⁸If only you had paid attention to My commandments! Then your well-being would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea. ¹⁹Your descendants would have been like the sand, and your offspring like its grains; their name would never be cut off or destroyed from My presence.'"

INTRODUCTION

Are there circumstances, heartbreaks, or calamities that might shake your confidence in the wisdom of God's plans for you or the greatness of His love for you? What if your first child suffered an eye infection six weeks after birth, and then a sham Dr., who attempted to cure the infection with a hot mustard poultice placed on the child's eyes, blinded her for life? What if you were the mother of that child and your husband in the prime of life unexpectedly became ill a few months later and was taken from you, forcing you to find work as a maid and entrust much of the rearing of your blind daughter to her Christian grandmother? More to the point of today's sermon, what if you had been this girl deprived of both vision and father in infancy?

Frances, the girl of this true story, was born in 1820 in a small town north of New York City. At age 8, she composed her first poem to proclaim she'd never allow her accidental blindness to make her bitter: "O what a happy soul am I / Although I cannot see. / I am resolved that in this World, / Contented I will be! / How many blessings I enjoy / That other people don't! / To weep and sigh because I'm blind, / I cannot, and I won't!" Nurtured from infancy in the Christian faith, she began at age 10 to memorize 5 Bible *chapters* weekly to gain the comfort and guidance of God's Word she couldn't read (Louis Braille's method to enable the blind to read was not generally adopted until the late 19th century). By age 15, she could recite from memory the four **Gospels**, the **Pentateuch**, **Proverbs**, and many **Psalms**. At 15, Frances gained admission to the newly founded New York Institute for the Blind, which would be her home for 23 years: 12 as a student; 11 as a teacher. Many of America's leaders visited this Institute and heard her recite her remarkable poetry (of which several volumes were published). Inspired by her example, they counted it a privilege to become her friend. In the course of her long life, Frances counted 22 Presidents among her friends, from John Quincy Adams to Woodrow Wilson. At age 23, she became the first woman to address Congress, who celebrated her stirring words and uplifting presence with a standing ovation! Why did she make such an impact upon others? Because she determined to cooperate with God's purposes for her life, in essence maximizing the cards He dealt her, rather than complaining of them or combating His wise plans for her!

At age 38, she married a brilliant blind scholar and instructor named Van Alstyne. They enjoyed and inspired each other for 44 happy years until his death in 1902. Not until age 43, when celebrated composer William Bradbury asked Frances to become his lyricist, did she pen her first hymn. This became the first of over 10,000 hymns, including, *Sweet Hour of Prayer*, *To God be the Glory* and *Blessed Assurance*. *All the Way My Savior Leads Me*, which she wrote at age 55, is especially autobiographical. "All the way my Savior leads me; What have I to ask beside? Can I doubt His tender mercy, Who through life has been my guide? Heavenly peace, divinest comfort, Here by faith in Him to dwell; For I know what'er befall me, Jesus doeth all things well." Frances Jane "Fanny" Crosby (1820-1915) became a household name in 19th-century America, inspiring millions to strive for a full, meaningful life despite their hardships. She once said, "It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life, and I thank Him for the dispensation. If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me." Despite the royalties for her songs, she left behind an estate of less than \$2000 at her death (\$48,000 today) due to her generous donations to charities and individuals in need of help. At her request, the epitaph on her simple headstone simply stated: "She hath done all she could."

Quite appropriately, the lyrics to her hymn, *My Savior First of All*, were the last she wrote. The first verse and chorus joyfully proclaim: "When my lifework is ended, and I cross the swelling tide, When the bright and glorious morning I shall see; I shall know my Redeemer when I reach the other side, And His smile will be the first to welcome me. I shall know Him, I shall know Him, And redeemed by His side I shall stand; I shall know Him, I shall know Him, By the print of the nails in His hand."

We are continuing this morning a sermon series on "The fear of the LORD." **Proverbs 9:10**, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding," is our primary verse in this study. Or, in the words of the New Living Translation, "Fear of the LORD is the foundation of wisdom. Knowledge of the Holy One results in good judgment." Sometimes we can make a mess of God's plans by overly analyzing His will or insisting upon too many changes to what God wants before we will be happy. A family from New York had a golden opportunity for happiness when they inherited a cattle ranch out west. After a few months, some of their closest friends came out for a surprise visit. When they asked about the ranch's name, the would-be rancher replied: "Well now, I wanted to name it the Bar-J. But my wife favored Suzy-Q, one of our sons wanted the Flying-W, and the other boy liked the Lazy-Y. So we're calling it the Bar-J-Suzy-Q-Flying-W-Lazy-Y." "But where are all your cattle?" the friends asked. The rancher replied, "That's a problem. None are surviving the branding."

We have discussed two ways to apply what it means to "fear the LORD": (1) "We honor God as our Creator-Lord by making serving and pleasing Him our #1 Priority in life," and (2) "We trust Him to be our moral guide through life, meaning we want to view ourselves and the world around us through His eyes and by His values." Of course, this is much easier said than done. Two weeks ago, we considered four rivals that we may allow to influence our decisions and our actions more than the Lord, thus displacing God's rightful place, and His values, in our lives: Peer Pressure, Society's Values, Authority Figures, and Our Own Thoughts and Desires. Yet, for all the problems we bring upon ourselves if we allow other priorities to become more important to us than fulfilling God's plans for creating us, or by leaning upon our own understanding of what's right and wrong instead of trusting fully in God's values, there are also wrong ways to "fear the LORD" that actually *displease* Him rather than please Him. Last week, we considered the "Fear that attempts to Purchase God's Favor" from *ignorance* of what it means to pray "in Jesus' name," from *insecurity*, or from *insincerity*. Today we consider, The Fear of God's Purpose.

THE FEAR OF GOD'S PURPOSE

There is now or has been a deep secret within many of us. We are afraid of what God may do with us if we give Him complete control of our lives. We fear, for instance, He may lead us away from our beloved America into the wastelands of Africa, where we'll minister to the Ubangi tribe and eat fried termites. Or, if we remain in America, God may want us to do nothing with every spare moment but read through the entire Bible each month, pray 8 hours a day, and pass out food and tracts weekly to the street people. In other words, many of us fear God's Purpose for our lives lest He turn us into some kind of freak and/or make us give up many everyday pleasures we enjoy. We think the cost of following God's will completely may be too great. Is it? Bob Harrington became known as "The Chaplain of Bourbon Street" during his years of operating a storefront church in New Orleans from 1962-78. After struggling, at first, to meet the \$500/week rent on his office building, he discovered the more he placed his physical and financial resources on the line for the Lord, the more the Lord prospered his ministry and his life in ways far beyond anything he'd dreamed might happen. One Sunday while on vacation and attending a service at another church, Bob Harrington pledged a large sum in response to the appeal of the Pastor concerning a desperate financial need. After the service, Bob's wife complained, "You are giving so much money away that you are going to put us into the poor house." He then drove his wife to a flop house in one of the poorest sections of New Orleans. After taking his wife inside, he called out to the residents, "How many of you are in here because you gave too much money to God?" Not one person raised his hand.

Many of you are familiar with **Jesus'** words of **Mark 8:34-37** (NASB): "And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. ³⁵ For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" **Jesus** clearly warned those whose lives are wrapped around power, fame, or fortune, "Is it worth it to trade self-glorification or self-indulgence in this life for the everlasting agonies of Hell?" But **Jesus** challenged His followers to ask, "What lasting impact are we having upon others for the LORD, or is our primary focus upon pleasing ourselves?" The Greek word for "profit" means, "to be useful, to do good" or "to be advantageous." When we come to the end of our time on earth, as did blind and fatherless Fanny Crosby, will the profitable imprint we made upon others for time and eternity testify our life was truly worth living? The Greek translation of the Old Testament in use in **Jesus'** day utilized the same Greek word for "profit" in **Isaiah 48:17**: "Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, 'I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go.'" The profitable result God promises us of abandoning ourselves to His purposes, rather than living to achieve our purposes, is found in **vss. 18-19**, "If only you had paid attention to My commandments! Then your well-being would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea. ¹⁹ Your descendants would have been like the sand, and your offspring like its grains; their name would never be cut off or destroyed from My presence." God assures us the more fully we embrace His values, His guidance, and His purpose for creating us, we'll be more enriched by an inner peace that will broaden and deepen over the years, as a river grows as it flows along its God-ordained course. We will also benefit by the quality of the life following God's values guarantee us, yielding blessings both expected and unexpected as the wonders of the seemingly measureless "waves of the sea." God's imprint upon our lives will also be multiplied in the lives of our "descendants," both in our earthly and spiritual family.

Thus, based upon what God promises us in **Mark 8:34-37** and **Isaiah 48:17**, we can conclude God's Purpose for us is nothing to fear, but will always be Higher, Holier, and Happier than merely living for our own purposes. God's purpose for us even may be so astounding that we may not be ready for it. After a lady's husband had heart surgery, they received a letter stating her husband had inherited one million dollars. She was worried about her husband's health, so she called their pastor and asked him to tell the good news to her husband. The pastor asked the husband, "Joe, if you were to be given one million dollars, what would you do?" Joe responded, "Why Pastor, I'd give it to you!" The pastor died of a heart attack!

Higher. In 1984, while living in Tulsa, I thought I'd met the girl for whom I'd looked all my life. For five full years, I longed and ached for her, convinced she was the best woman in the world for me. The LORD often spoke to my heart, "Are you willing to allow your love for her to be as nothing in comparison to your love for Me?" Was this cruel because God was insensitive to how desperately I wanted her? No. It was because He knew in 1999 He would bring Loretta into my life. My love for her has grown to the point I now wonder what I saw in the other girl. She could never have been the personal blessing and ministry aid Loretta has become to me! What does **Isaiah 55:9** (NASB) say? "'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.'"

Holier. God can fill our lives with more of His awesome Presence the more we yield ourselves to His will, because our lives are holier; more set apart to His Purpose. People can truly encounter the LORD by our impact upon them. In my student ministry days, the mother of a student had subsided into a coma at St. Joseph's. She'd been witnessed to repeatedly by her children and husband. But she was a staunch Catholic, believing the Catholic Church alone could dispense God's grace to save her, so she closed her heart to the Gospel. Twice, God drew me to lie on the floor of her hospital room to intercede for her. His Spirit made me aware of the spiritual battle for her soul, with Satan trying to drag her off to death and damnation. A few hours later, she awoke from her coma and asked her husband to explain how **Jesus** could become her personal Savior. She opened her heart to the Gospel and died a few hours later in the arms of **Jesus!**

Happier. Is it not true that, often after we achieve what we thought we needed to be lastingly happy, we are still restless and unsatisfied? God really does know what's best for us. When we make decisions that give priority to God's Purpose for us over our own purposes and desires, we will find a happiness we would never have known otherwise. Poet William Wordsworth (1750-1850) writes of a bird carried from Norway in a fierce storm. The little bird was frightened. It fought hard against the gale-force winds to win its way back to the security of its homeland. But all its efforts were in vain. At last it yielded to the wind, thinking this storm would soon carry it to its death. But instead of being carried to its destruction, as it feared, this little bird found itself borne to the warmer shores of England. It soon found a much better home amidst the green meadows and forests of this new land than the bird knew even existed.

CONCLUSION

We have nothing to fear from God's Purpose for us. At times He will lead us in different paths than we would have chosen for ourselves, as He did Fanny Crosby. It may seem our Lord is asking of us a greater sacrifice than we think is best for us. But God's Purpose for us will always be Higher, Holier, and Happier than we would have chosen for ourselves. Will we cooperate with our Heavenly Father and abandon ourselves in faith to His wisdom and His love for us, even in the face of discouraging circumstances, heart-breaks, or apparent calamities?

Some years back, a large building project found it necessary to add a night shift to finish it on time. One night, a man working along the edge of a wall several stories high suddenly lost his balance. As he fell, he somehow managed to grasp the edge of a lower wall with his fingers. He desperately held on for dear life. Everything below him was pitch black. He called out; hoping someone above would hear him and come to his rescue. But his cries were lost in the chatter of the riveting machines, the puffing of hoisting engines, and the myriad of other sounds arising from such construction. No one saw him; none heard him. Soon he felt his arms grow numb, and against every effort of his will to hang on, his straining fingers begin to release. Frantically he prayed, calling upon the Lord in every way he could. But no miracle occurred. He felt a growing sense of being abandoned to a cruel fate by everyone, even God. At last his fingers slipped from the wall, and, with a retching sob of sheer terror, he fell—about three inches to a scaffold that had been there in the darkness all the time! God had not abandoned Him. The blessings of God's purposes for His life continued to surround him, even when he lost sight of God and of His blessings!