

GRANT CASTLEBERRY

The
Honor
of
God

The Honor of God

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GRANT R. CASTLEBERRY



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

The Honor of God

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To my wife and co-laborer in the gospel,
GraceAnna Castleberry

“An excellent wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.”

Proverbs 31:10

And to our children:
AudreyKate, Evangeline, Charles, Patrick, and Truman.

May you each live for God's honor
all the days of your lives.

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PART ONE

Introduction

The honor of God lies at the fabric of our existence. This is because the honor of God is the chief end of God. God created the universe and everything in it for this one ultimate purpose: *the honor of His own name*.

This momentous realization came to me when I was a young man, and in some ways, it has possessed me ever since. It is one of those great themes that once you understand it, you can never forget it. For the past twenty years, I have studied this theme as it unfolds across the Bible, and it has transformed the way I think about God and myself. It is no overstatement to say that the *honor of God* has become one of the defining themes of my life and the foundation of my worldview.

I also believe that it is one of the key elements in recovering biblical Christianity. The basic meaning of *honor* is “weightiness.” Honoring God means that we view His character, His rule, and His sovereignty as the *weightiest* realities in our lives. Unfortunately, this aspect of God’s weightiness is largely missing in modern Christianity, where it has been lost amid a wave of frivolous worship that puts man at the center. In many worship services, Christians are exposed to a version of God who is not God at all.

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Instead, they encounter a version of God who is an encouraging life coach who simply wants us to be the best version of ourselves.

But that is not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is the Lord of the cosmos, the “judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42), and the loving Savior of the world (John 3:16). The God of the Bible is, in a word, *holy*.

God is truly awesome—death-defyingly awesome. Yet in Christ, we fear Him not as sinners who will be judged but as sons of our kind heavenly Father who reigns over heaven and earth. There is a reason that Solomon declared, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (Prov. 9:10). The God-centered life emerges when we see God as He really is.

The Loss of Honor

To compound the issue, many moderns have lost the lens through which to see and understand God in the way that He is presented in the Bible. This is because we lack a framework for the concepts of *honor* and *shame*. In our modern world, wealth often takes precedence over honor. Many people would rather be wealthy, indeed infamous—even for doing something shameful—than preserve their own honor. What matters more in many people’s minds is popularity and wealth, even if that popularity comes at the expense of their honor.

This reality of the loss of honor was pressed home to me when I was series commander at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island. One of my jobs was to teach the recruits the core values of the United States Marine Corps. To do this, I gathered three to four hundred recruits in a large auditorium, and I taught them

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the Marines' core values of *honor*, *courage*, and *commitment*, which have been the core values of the Marine Corps since 1775.

The recruits understood *courage* quite easily. Courage is acting in the presence of danger despite our fear. It is being able to move forward and act with bravery in the face of danger. They also understood *commitment*, which means being “all in” and giving it our all, even when there is great cost in achieving the goal. But the value that they struggled to understand was *honor*. I began to teach them the concept by having them stand and sing the Marine Corps hymn at attention. I did this because there is a section of the hymn that goes:

First to fight for right and freedom
And to keep our honor clean;
We are proud to claim the title
Of United States Marine.

I explained to them what the line “to keep our honor clean” means by telling them how the Marine Corps had carried a certain weightiness in history. People respected Marines because they have fought and won some of America's toughest battles. Keeping the honor clean, then, means not doing anything to compromise that respect. I emphasized that it means a great deal to pin that eagle, globe, and anchor on the collar of one's uniform and that every Marine has a responsibility to bring honor to the corps, our nation, and our fellow Marines. To bring shame through our actions would be a catastrophic failure for a Marine. When the Marine Corps is brought up in conversation, we want people to respect and speak highly of the corps.

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Often, even after this hymn exercise, I was still met with confused faces. Honor was simply a difficult concept to grasp for eighteen- and nineteen-year-old recruits who had grown up in secularist America, so I explained it with examples of famous Marines such as Chesty Puller, John Basilone, and Alexander Bonnyman, who had brought honor to corps and country by serving with distinction. These examples brought a sense of dignity and renown to the Marine Corps that should not be tarnished by other Marines. Finally, the message began to break through to the recruits. Honor is simply a foreign idea in our modern culture.

Defining *Honor*

Remember the names Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton? Besides their pivotal role in early American politics, they are famous for taking part in a tragic duel against each other. A duel seems like a foreign contest to us moderns because we often fail to understand the element that lies at its heart—*honor*. A duel took place when someone's honor had been slighted. In the case of Burr and Hamilton, Hamilton had slighted Burr's character when he had opposed Burr and instead favored his archrival Thomas Jefferson in the election for vice president.¹ In Burr's mind, his honor demanded vindication, so Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel, which Burr subsequently won. Hamilton died a day later.

I often wear a pair of old Allen Edmonds dress shoes. I try to keep them shined up as best as I can because they belonged to my grandfather. To honor him, I often wear these shoes when I preach on Sunday mornings. They remind me visually of the weightiness of his influence on my life. Every day, we do all sorts of things like this that demonstrate honor. When we stand up for the Pledge of

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Allegiance or the national anthem and put our right hand over our heart, we demonstrate honor. We are making a public display that our nation weighs “heavy” in our lives.

How does the Bible define honor? The Hebrew word used to translate “honor” is *kabod*, which literally means being “weighty,” “heavy,” or “severe.” Sometimes it is translated in the Old Testament as “glory.” The basic idea is that honoring something or someone means that we are showing the heaviness or weightiness of that person in our life. In the New Testament, the Greek verbs *timaō* and *megalynō* basically mean the same thing—that we are giving honor or deference, showing the heaviness of something, respecting something, or showing admiration for something. On the flip side is the concept of *shame*. To shame something is to treat it as though it were nothing.

The World of the Bible

The concepts of honor and shame were foundational to the worldview of the biblical authors. They were also foundational in how God dealt with the nation of Israel in the Old Testament and with the church in the New Testament. The fifth commandment states, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Ex. 20:12). Children have a responsibility to God to honor their parents. This means that they are to respect their parents as “weighty” in their lives.

Similarly, David prays in Psalm 31:1, “In you, O LORD, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me!” A few verses later, in verse 11, David laments, “Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach, especially

to my neighbors, and an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me.” It is this idea of being treated lightly that he dreads. In his mind, one of the most fearful realities was that the people of Israel would shame him.

In Psalm 35:26, David prays this for his enemies: “Let them be put to shame and disappointed altogether who rejoice at my calamity! Let them be clothed with shame and dishonor who magnify themselves against me!” With the exception of their death in final judgment, this was the worst thing that one could pray against others. David is saying, essentially: “Let them be clothed with shame. Let my enemies be treated with contempt.”

In reference to all the horrific things that the Babylonians did to Israel, the prophet Jeremiah said, “We are put to shame, for we have heard reproach; dishonor has covered our face, for foreigners have come into the holy places of the LORD’s house” (Jer. 51:51). Jeremiah interpreted the Babylonians’ coming into the temple in terms of shame and reproach on the people. In another example, when the opponents of the Jews tried to stop the building of the second temple, they wrote to King Artaxerxes, “Now because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king’s dishonor, therefore we send and inform the king” (Ezra 4:14). They invoked the king’s honor to try to impede the construction of the temple.

The opening pages of the New Testament demonstrate that the world at that time was still very much an honor/shame world. After Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, he decided to “divorce her quietly” because he was “a just man and unwilling to put her to shame” (Matt. 1:19). Joseph knew that if he divorced Mary, her life would be marked by shame.

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In one of the most famous verses of the New Testament, Paul declared in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel.” Everywhere in the ancient world, when the gospel was preached, it conveyed shame to many listeners because it was the message of a crucified Savior. In the ancient world, there was no greater picture of shame than someone’s dying naked on a cross. Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 1:23 that the cross was folly to gentiles and foolishness to Jews because they understood the cross to be a place of cursing. Therefore, the message was considered shameful. Yet Paul boasted, “I am not ashamed of the gospel.” He would not allow himself to be ashamed because he had seen its power unleashed in people’s lives: “It is the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16).

Paul was also concerned that the evangelists who worked with him not bring unnecessary reproach and shame to the gospel. Paul told Timothy, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Why might Timothy be ashamed? First, if he disqualified himself morally by committing a grievous sin that brought reproach on the name of Christ. Second, if he failed in his duties to properly teach the Word of God. Therefore, Paul essentially says to Timothy, “Rightly handle the word of truth so that you do not bring reproach and shame on the office of pastor.”

Similarly, he told Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:13–14, “I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach.” Reproach is shame. Timothy was instructed

to keep the commands and teachings of Christ and the Apostles “free from reproach” until Christ returned. To Titus, Paul pointed out that good character brings shame to one’s opponents: “Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us” (Titus 2:7–8).

Not only were saints exhorted to bring honor to the gospel, but they were implored to give honor to God. Paul made the remarkable statement to Timothy that God “alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen” (1 Tim. 6:16). As we realize God’s transcendent character, our only proper response is to give Him honor. This is the vertical aspect of honor in the Christian life.

Paul was stressing that the defining reality in our lives should be the weightiness of God. He was saying that God is to press on us in such a way that we live our lives to honor Him. This should be the driving impulse in the church as well—that in everything the name of God would be honored and that our lives would not bring Him reproach.

Recovering Biblical Christianity

Unfortunately, this concern for God’s honor and reverence for His holiness has disappeared like a mist on a hot day. It has been replaced with a watered-down understanding of both God and the gospel. This is reflected in the aesthetics, the music, the posture, and most of all the preaching of the modern church. Much preaching has been reduced to a mixture of comedy and pragmatism:

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“How can you be a better parent? How can you be a better steward of your finances?” Even pulpits have been traded in for tables littered with trinkets. Everything is casual, with one of the main goals being that no one would ever feel uncomfortable.

What is missing? It is the *vision of a holy God*. It is the authority of God’s Word. It is the reverence for His character. I believe that the state of the church is so dismal because God is simply not seen in much of evangelical worship. How can we see God if we do not open and deeply study His Word? In short, how can we live a reverent life if we have never encountered God?

I once saw a documentary about climbers who set out to climb K2, the second-highest mountain in the world. Many say that it is the hardest mountain in the world to climb. In the documentary, the cameraman is walking behind the climbers as they make their way to K2 base camp, from which they will begin their ascent of the mountain. In perhaps the most dramatic part of the documentary, they round a curve in the trail and catch a glimpse of K2 for the first time. When they see it, fear rushes over them. They are blown away in sheer terror at the size of the mountain.² It is one thing to know that K2 is the second-tallest mountain; it is quite another to stand before its face. I have noticed the same thing when people truly encounter God. There is an awe factor. There is shock and amazement. There is quietness after the service ends. I believe that this is how it should be. Furthermore, there are three fundamental realizations when you encounter God: (1) that God is holy, (2) that you are a great sinner, and (3) that His Word is true. You are left with the impression that these are the most true realities in the universe. It is from this mindset that God calls us to live before Him.

An important Latin phrase that came out of the Reformation fleshes out this idea: *coram Deo*, which means “before the face of God.” I was first exposed to this idea while listening to R.C. Sproul’s lectures on *The Holiness of God*.³ I was struck by the truth that the reality of God is to press down on us so that everything is different. Our ethics, our morals, our family life, our work, and our worship are all transformed underneath the all-encompassing shadow of a holy God. We are to live *coram Deo*—before the face of God. This is the essence of a biblical worldview. We view all of life in the light of its Creator. We live for His honor.

The Weightiness of God

The writer of Hebrews says, “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:28–29). The Greek word used for “reverence” is *eulabeia*. It means “reverent awe in the presence of God” and is used to describe the holy fear of God. The writer of Hebrews emphasizes that this reverence should define our worship of God, even as new covenant believers.

The author uses this word one other time, in Hebrews 5:7. It is a startling appearance of the word because he uses it to describe the actions of the Lord Jesus Christ: “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his *reverence*”—because of His *eulabeia*. Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God. He was with God the Father from all eternity. He and the Father are one: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

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Yet the writer of Hebrews says that throughout His ministry, Jesus approached the Father with “reverence.” His *reverence for God* defined His interactions with the Father. He was heard because of His holy awe for God. This gives us great insight into how the Lord Jesus lived His life. He lived *coram Deo*—with a huge vision of God. He never lost that vision of God. It never slipped from view, and no obstacle ever eclipsed it. No Pharisee or Sadducee ever impeded it. The devil himself could not diminish it. The vision of God consumed Jesus.

God as a “Consuming Fire”

If this is how the Lord Jesus approached the Father, we too must approach God with this type of reverence and awe (Heb. 12:28). “Awe” means that we tremble at the awesomeness of God. We use the word *awesome* all the time, but it really should be reserved for what is most awesome—namely, God—because “our God is a consuming fire” (v. 29). When was the last time you heard God described as a “consuming fire” in a sermon or in a discipleship meeting? We are so used to focusing on the immanent God who comforts us that we tend to forget His transcendence and holiness. He is outside space and time. He is holy, omnipotent, eternal, righteous, and all-powerful. He is a “consuming fire.”

Perhaps the writer of Hebrews was thinking about the manifestation of God to Moses on the great mountain of God, Mount Sinai. According to Exodus 24:12–13: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.’ So Moses rose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God.”

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The rest of the children of Israel were not allowed to go up on the mountain. They had pylons around the entire mountain that were basically “Do Not Enter” signs. The elders were allowed to come up to a certain point, but even they were not allowed to go up the mountain. If anyone transgressed these boundary markers, he would be struck dead by God.

The text says: “Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory [the *kabod*] of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai” (vv. 15–16). Literally, the heavy presence of God dwelt on the mountain. This glory was so transcendent and so holy that it is hard to even picture what it must have looked like. “And the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud” (v. 16). Then the text says, “Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire” (v. 17).

The manifestation of God was a consuming fire—scorching the top of the mountain. Remarkably, Moses went into that cloud of fire for forty days and forty nights. That picture of God is what the writer of Hebrews is wanting us to think about—this awesome encounter with a holy God. For this reason, we approach God through our Great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ. But we still approach Him with reverence and awe.

I once heard theologian Sinclair Ferguson speak about an event that occurred in his life when he was a young man. Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones came to Scotland to preach when Ferguson was a teenager.⁴ The first night that Lloyd-Jones preached, Ferguson could not attend. The next day, he spoke to a friend who had gone to hear him. He asked her something along these lines: “What was it like to hear Dr. Lloyd-Jones preach?”

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She looked at him quietly and then said, “It felt like the building was about to fall down.”

The presence of God had been so tangibly felt that it seemed like the walls of the building were going to collapse. That is reverent Christianity. It is a genuine encounter with God through His Word that changes us. We feel His presence pressing on us through His Word in a demonstrable way. Paul called it a “demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor. 2:4). Until we recover that, we have not recovered truly reverent Christianity. True Christianity is knowing God. It is living *coram Deo*. It is reverence and awe for God.

Lloyd-Jones once said, “True Christianity is the recovery of the awareness of the awesomeness of God.”⁵ He went on to say: “The basis of everything is the sovereign, transcendent, living God, who in his eternal, glorious freedom, acts, intervenes, and interferes with the life of the whole Church and of individuals. And if there is anything that is more obvious than anything else in the life of the Church today, it is the failure to start with, and to believe, that truth.”⁶

This is the problem of the modern church. We have not started with the reality of the transcendent God. Without this understanding, it is impossible to comprehend the problem of sin as it relates to God. And without a proper understanding of the problem of sin, we cannot understand the real meaning of the atonement. A substitutionary atonement makes sense only in the light of a holy God. We cannot explain the reality of sin without the reality of a holy God. Everything hinges on understanding the reality of a transcendent God.

Lloyd-Jones said this back in 1959, and today, we see the negligible effect that Christianity is having on Western culture. The

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church became impotent when it put man in the place of God. If God is not a heavy reality in the churches, why should He be a heavy reality in the world? God does not call us to comfortableness. In fact, the vision of God as a “consuming fire” is very uncomfortable. But it is this vision that will inspire us to sanctification. The Apostle Peter reminds us that it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16).

In other words, God’s holiness is to drive us to holiness. I remember once going to a movie with my grandfather, and he walked out fifteen minutes after the movie started because God’s name was blasphemed. For him, that was worse than anything else. He carried with him a sense of the Lord’s holiness. If we are going to recover this vision of God, we must recover this sense of reverence for God. We should shudder when God’s name is shamed and dishonored.

If the modern church would recover this type of reverence for God, I believe that churches would fill up again. People would drive from far and wide to encounter the living God. The world would have to stop and take notice of the phenomenon of Christianity because of the reality of God in our lives. It all begins with the reality of being God-centered people who know His weightiness in our own personal lives.

The Rule of Honor

First Samuel 2:30 introduces us to what I call the *rule of honor*: “Therefore the LORD, the God of Israel, declares: ‘I promised that your house and the house of your father should go in and out before me forever,’ but now the LORD declares: ‘Far be it from me, for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.’” This rule of honor always holds true.

I was first exposed to this rule as a boy. My mom rented a movie called *Chariots of Fire*, which is based on the true story of two British runners named Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams. Viewers soon realize that Liddell is motivated by something very different from what motivates the other runners. He is motivated by the *honor of God*, to advance the fame of God’s name. At one point in the film, Liddell remarks: “To run and to win is to honor Him. And when I run, I feel His pleasure.”

These words were not mere lip service. Before the 1924 Olympic Games, Liddell learned that the qualifying heats for the 100-meter dash would be held on a Sunday. He told the British Olympic Committee that he could not run on a Sunday because it would dishonor

God by breaking the fourth commandment. They pressured Liddell to run, but he would not relent. Finally, the committee decided that he would run the 400-meter dash instead of the 100-meter. The 400-meter dash, which equals one lap around the track, is known for the tough demands it places on the runner.

Liddell ran an astonishing race that summer in Paris and won Olympic gold, setting a world record in the process.¹ It was a remarkable accomplishment. The second-place finisher, American Horatio Fitch, said after the race: “I had no idea he would win it. I couldn’t believe a man could set such a pace and finish.”²

In the film, an American runner who had heard about Liddell’s decision to not run on Sunday approached Liddell before his race and handed him a note containing a portion of 1 Samuel 2:30, “He who honors me, I will honor.” In real life, it was a trainer who had given Liddell the note. And this note, which served as an inspiration to Liddell, stated this nonnegotiable rule of honor.

To better understand this rule of honor, it’s vital to understand the context of this verse. As the book of 1 Samuel opens, Eli is the priest of Israel. His sons, who serve as priests alongside him, have dishonored the Lord by eating the choice meats that were to be given to God in the sacrifices. Eli’s sons were also fornicating with prostitutes at the front of the tabernacle of the Lord. An unnamed “man of God” comes to Eli, pronouncing God’s judgment on Eli and on the priesthood of the line of Aaron. The indictment of the prophet is that Eli has treated his sons as weightier than the Lord. Then this man of God communicates the rule of honor: “Therefore the LORD, the God of Israel, declares: ‘I promised that your house and the house of your father should go in and out before me forever,’ but now the LORD declares: ‘Far be it from me, for those

who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed” (1 Sam. 2:30).

Notice what the man of God says. God will honor those who honor Him. God will treat as weighty those who treat God as weighty. The reverse is true as well. God will lightly esteem those who despise Him. Eli and his sons would be judged because they had treated God flippantly. This is the rule of honor. If we honor God, God will honor us. If we shame God, God will shame us.

The Rule of Honor in Scripture

Once we understand this rule, we begin to see it throughout Scripture. For example, David teaches this principle in Psalm 37:39–40:

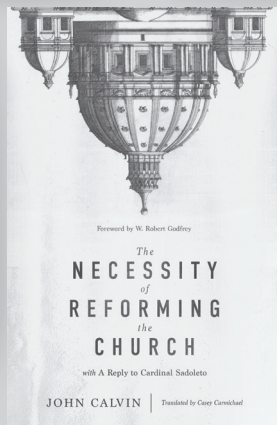
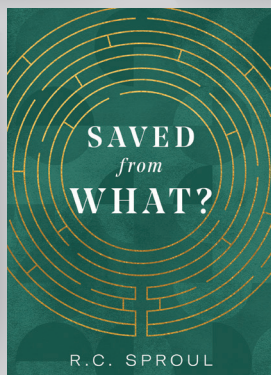
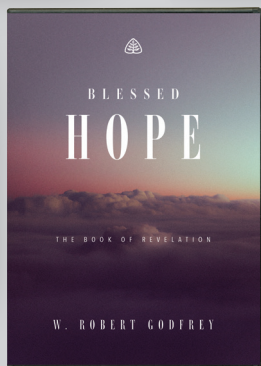
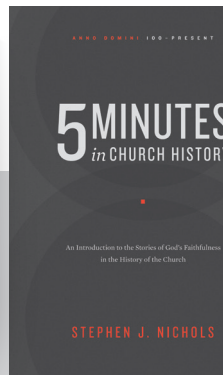
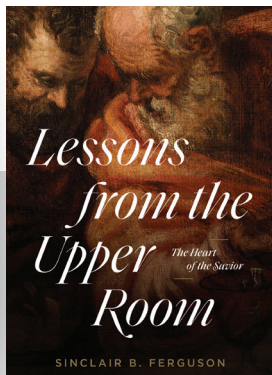
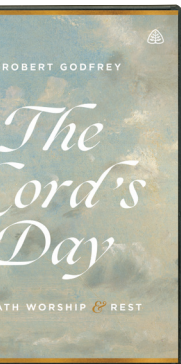
The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD;
he is their stronghold in the time of trouble.
The LORD helps them and delivers them;
he delivers them from the wicked and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.

David is confident of the Lord’s deliverance because he is honoring the Lord by taking refuge in Him. The Psalms are replete with similar statements.

God declares through Hosea 10:12:

Sow for yourselves righteousness;
reap steadfast love;
break up your fallow ground,
for it is the time to seek the LORD,
that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.

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