

Recovering the Fear of the Lord

If you have ever been at the mercy of the forces of nature and felt your vulnerability, you have experienced a very important emotion – awed fear. It can come during a violent thunderstorm, as the lightning strikes increasingly closer to where you are. It can come if you experience a mild or more severe earthquake, and felt the very ground tremble underneath you.

Sometimes, you'll feel it if you've been in the ocean, either as a swimmer or as a sailor, and encountered waves or currents that are too big or strong for you. And certainly if you've witness or experience a typhoon or powerful storm, been near a tornado or hurricane area, and heard and felt the power of the wind.

During these experiences, you feel something quite significant: your vulnerability before such power. For a brief time, you realise you are in the presence of a power much greater than yourself, and it confronts you with your weakness, your mortality, your insignificance. You realise you are in danger, and your lack of power to save yourself or help yourself fills you with fear. When you come out of that dangerous situation, the relief and gladness is intense.

Interestingly, humans seek a kind of safe fear. Humans, on a fairly regular basis, seek to almost reproduce that emotion of being overwhelmed or terrified, so long as they know they will actually be safe and come out of it fine. One example is amusement parks. At amusement parks, all sorts of death-defying rides are built to simulate what would be a very vulnerable, terrifying, dangerous situation, all with the knowledge that it is in fact safe (or so they tell us). If humans didn't want this emotion of fear combined with safety, amusement parks would go out of business.

Another example, and a perverse one in my opinion, is horror movies. Here scenes and stories that cause terror and fear can be viewed in the safety of a theatre or your home, knowing that it is safe to watch this, it is all only a story. Further examples can be seen in the thrill-seekers of today: increasing numbers of people rock climbing, para-gliding, abseiling, and a host of other adventure sports and pastimes. Many times, it is because of the thrill, the risk, the fear that it causes, combined with the knowledge that there is a measure of safety in it.

I believe this desire points to something in the human soul. Humans were made to experience this feeling of great awe. We are not advanced monkeys with a sense of morality, we are spiritual beings housed in physical frames, who were made to know and experience things far greater than the everyday banality our culture feeds us. And the thrill-seeking so prevalent amongst us is testament to the fact that we hear the echo in our own souls of longing for something much, much greater than ourselves.

I believe the Bible teaches us that this emotion finds its ultimate fulfilment in knowing God. The Bible teaches us that we were made for God. And to that end, there is a gaping hole in our souls that TV and music and gadgets and sports and books and entertainment and travel and work and money will not fill. Our-thrill seeking is like a dull ache, an itch that reminds us that our culture is not fulfilling the grand theme of our souls – to be overwhelmed by a force and power far greater than us.

Our media and commercial culture feeds us a steady diet of banality, foolishness and triviality. The ads, the YouTube videos, series and shows are silly and shallow. And though we stuff ourselves with this till we are full, the groaning in our souls reminds us that we have not been nourished. We were made for far greater experiences than the TV offers us.

This experience is the fear of the Lord. Believers in Christ have the opportunity to enter into this awe-inspiring experience again and again, and find their souls satisfied by the joy of fearing God. The fear of the Lord is the consummation of the experience that every soul is looking for when we go thrill-seeking.

Such is the shallows state of Christianity that it is not unusual to hear a professing Christian saying something like, “We mustn’t fear God! We must love Him! Fearing God is the Old Testament God. The New Testament God is a God of love.”

Those are very sad statements for a number of reasons. Firstly, they reveal the person does not know anything about the fear of God. No one who has experienced it will see it negatively. Secondly, they show such a person really doesn’t know God at all. They have made a god in their own image, using a few Bible verses out of context, but he is a crude stick-figure representation of the true Great I AM.

Thirdly, they show they don’t understand the Bible at all. The Bible is not a fragmented book with two gods – one Old Testament and one New Testament. It is the same God throughout. We are told to fear God in a number of New Testament scriptures – **2 Corinthians 7:1, 1 Peter 1:17, 1 Peter 2:17, Hebrews 12:28**. Though we see the grace of God clearly in the New Testament, God’s grace is clearly seen in the Old Testament as well. And though we clearly see God’s judgment in the Old Testament, we probably see it even clearer in the New Testament – both at the cross, and in the book of Revelation.

Fearing God is very much for us today. But let’s deal with a reasonable objection: isn’t fear a negative thing? Doesn’t John tell us in **1 John 4:18** that perfect love casts out fear? Didn’t Paul tell Timothy in **2 Timothy 1:7**: *“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”* Isn’t Jesus recorded as having said “Fear not” at least seven times in the Gospels?

The answer is yes, all those things are true. But since Scripture does not contradict Scripture, we must reason there is a kind of fear God does not want us to have, and there is a kind of fear He does want us to have. In fact, you see these two ideas in one verse in **Matthew 10:28**: *“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”*

Fearing man, being anxious, feeling threatened or vulnerable, or at risk from man or from circumstances, does not please God. This is an act of unbelief. It suggests we do not trust that God is in full control, that God is all powerful, that God is loving and good to us, that God will mercifully act on our behalf and always work things together for good. This kind of fear rejects what God says about Himself. This is the kind of fear God commands us not to have.

But the right kind of fear is the opposite. It is a fear of God that actually rises from faith, from having seen who He is and from beholding and believing the God that *is*. This is kind of fear God commands us to have, and in fact, He commands it again and again.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Proverbs 1:7

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Proverbs 9:10

The fear of the LORD prolongs days, but the years of the wicked will be shortened.

Proverbs 10:27

In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence, and His children will have a place of refuge. The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death.

Proverbs 14:26-27

The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom, and before honour is humility.

Proverbs 15:33

The fear of the LORD leads to life, and he who has it will abide in satisfaction; he will not be visited with evil.

Proverbs 19:23

By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches and honour and life.

Proverbs 22:4

Do not let your heart envy sinners, but be zealous for the fear of the LORD all the day.

Proverbs 23:17

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

Ecclesiastes 12:13

There is no real experience of God without it. No wisdom without it. No holy living without it. So what is this fear of the Lord? Here is a definition: *The fear of the Lord is the sense of awe and trembling left over when you contemplate both the goodness and the greatness of God.* I realise that's not a little catch-phrase, so it's probably worth repeating!

The fear of the Lord is that same sense of vulnerability you feel in the midst of a great storm or at the top of a mountain. You sense your insignificance, smallness, and weakness in the face of a power much greater than you. You realise this great power could wipe you out. But then you behold the goodness of God, and His disposition toward you, and it calms your heart and there is a trembling joy – you are in the presence of this overwhelming power, but this power smiles

upon you. And the emotion left over is the amazed, floored, overwhelmed sense of joyful, grateful awe called the fear of the Lord.

Sadly, many professing Christians have lost this. We think that by contemplating the greatness of God, we will somehow drive people away, since everything today is about marketing God as trendy, cool and useful to you. But the results are very clear in modern-day Christianity. Everywhere there is flippancy. Triteness. Taking the name of God on our lips all too easily.

For example, the attitudes of youth ministry are sometimes borderline profane, boisterously blasphemous – as they talk about the Lord Jesus Christ as ‘JC’, as they play music from the gutter, sadly labelled as ‘Christian music’ that makes God sound cheap, trite, a pop God. Their theology is all about meeting their needs. Sin and judgement are downplayed. Separation and a holy life are put on the back shelf while God is made out to be the greatest product you can ever find.

All this goes on while we have the audacity to use the word ‘awesome’ in our songs. Awesome means ‘filled with awe’ – and to find a modern Christian truly filled with awe at their God is becoming a rare thing indeed. I’d so go far as to suggest a moratorium on using the word until we have come to again see God’s awesomeness, and it has floored us and terrified us and sanctified us! This fear of the Lord will only return when we stop making God in our own image, and devote ourselves to seeing God as He is in His Word:

*These things you have done, and I have been silent; **you thought that I was one like yourself.** But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.*

Psalms 50:21

For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah 55:8-9

We must be in the Word and beholding who God is – and He is not like us. But if we are committed to do meditate on Scripture with an honest heart, we will see two sides of God emerge. We will see God’s greatness, and we will see God’s goodness.

1. God’s greatness

God’s greatness are all of God’s attributes that make Him unlike us. This includes His Omnipotence – He has all power, and it’s unlimited. Nothing is too difficult for Him; none can oppose Him. It includes His Sovereignty – that He exercises this power as He wants to. He is the Sovereign of the universe. His kingdom rules over all. He does all His pleasure, and works all things after the counsel of His will.

It includes His omnipresence. He is everywhere present at the same time. As David contemplated in Psalm 139 how he could not outrun God, nor find a place where God would not be. God is so great, He is everywhere. God’s greatness includes the fact that He knows everything – he has all knowledge, potential and actual. Nothing surprises Him, nor does He

ever have to learn. Leading on from this is His wisdom. He always uses this perfect knowledge in a perfect way.

His greatness is also seen in the fact that He is Eternal. No one made Him, and no one will ever end Him. He has always been. Not only so, but He has always been perfect. He is unchanging. He can never increase or decrease, because He is eternally perfect. Our God is also great because He is self-sufficient. He does not need any kind of outside sustenance. He does not need food or water or sunshine or oxygen. He does not need permission to go on living. He does not need any kind of maintenance or upkeep. He is completely self-sufficient – the I AM.

Not only so, but He is infinite. He has no limits or boundaries. Each of His attributes is what it is to the fullest possible extent. He transcends all of our experience. God's greatness is further demonstrated in that He is the Supreme One. He is Greater than anyone else. Nothing He created can compare to Him. Now here is the scary part. This great God is also a judge.

God does not tolerate violations of His glory, rejection of His authority, ingratitude for His goodness. All this greatness can and will be exercised against those who sin against Him. God is very displeased when His own creation thumb their noses at Him. His anger is a furious displeasure that will seek to right the wrongs and restore equity, balance and order to His universe. Now if all this power is going to be exercised against sinners, the question is: who falls into that category?

The answer is: you do, and so do I. This is why no one should say that the fear of the Lord does not include any kind of fear. Of course it does. This God is dangerous. He can and will destroy sinners. This is far worse than facing the threat of lightning or a storm or a wave. Those can kill us, but at least they are simply impersonal forces. This is a Person, with all His power arrayed against those who sin.

The flippancy, the triteness, the casualness and the foolishness so prevalent in the modern church is brought about because very few are meditating on the greatness of God, and our consequent vulnerable position. When we behold the greatness of God, it should cause us terror. This was the reaction of those who saw His greatness. When Israel saw His greatness descending on Mount Sinai – the reaction was one of fear:

Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.

Exodus 19:16

Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die." And Moses said to the people, "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin."

Exodus 20:18-20

We see the same thing happening when Isaiah beholds the greatness of God. Does he take out a tambourine and begin singing? No – he cries out, "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a

man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty” (Isaiah 6:5). God’s greatness made Him realise He was at risk and vulnerable; there was a threat to Him as he was a sinner.

2. God’s goodness

But then, we are to also meditate on the goodness of God. For gladly, our God is a good God. He is supremely loving – seeking the ultimate good of His creatures. He is merciful – wanting to rescue us from our miserable condition. He is gracious, even when we have offended Him and sinned against Him. He is patient and longsuffering, bearing with our frailty, weakness, failure and imperfections. He is gentle, not forcing us or using all His power on us. He is meek, keeping His power under control. He is faithful, keeping His promises to us, continuing to provide and protect and save.

And all this climaxed in the cross of Jesus Christ. There, God’s goodness to man is seen in all its blazing glory. He will not surrender His greatness in demanding holiness and justice from sinners. But He will also not surrender His goodness – wanting to heal and help and bless and revive. In the cross, you see the goodness of God. He is all that power, but with gentleness. He is all that justice, but with mercy. He is all that strength, but with grace to the needy. He is all that wrath, but with longsuffering. He is all that sovereignty, but with love.

Though God is Supreme, He looks down to the lowly, poor one. He is a loving, patient, merciful God. And this gives you trembling consolation, trembling confidence, assurance, and He bids you to come. And as we see these awesome contrasts – so great, but so good – we have a sense of trembling joy, awe with hope, gravity and gladness. We are seeing that God is dangerous, but in Christ, we are safe. It just depends which side of Him you’re on.

If you are found on Christ’s side, His awesome power will be exercised in your favour. He will shield you from the stormy blast. He will hide you in the cleft of a rock. But if you are on the wrong side of Him, you will face the full fury of God. All the anger of man put together is nothing compared to the displeasure of God.

In science, you have both a centripetal force and a centrifugal force. If you tie a rock to a string and swing it above your head, both forces are in effect. The centripetal force pulls the string towards you, while the centrifugal force pushes the rock outward. Both forces must be present for the tension that makes it possible to swing this contraption above your head. In the same way, both sides of God must be present in our mind for us to have a healthy view of God – His goodness, and His greatness.

Meditation on the goodness of God without meditation on the greatness of God will lead to us becoming familiar, unappreciative of grace, cocky and shallow in our understanding of Him. It’s precisely this overemphasis that has led to the flippant, superficial Christianity we see so much of today. Meditation on the greatness of God without meditation on the goodness of God will cause us to lose hope, to fear wrath, to avoid God instead of turning to Him, to revere Him from a distance, but never enjoy Him.

God wants this healthy tension. And so do you – your soul cries out for this feeling of awe. It longs for it. And it will only ever find rest in the fear of the Lord.