

The Fear of the Lord

Preacher: Jurgen S.

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References: **Proverbs 9**, Ecclesiastes 12:13; Exodus 20:18-20; Genesis 28:10-17; Deuteronomy 10:12; Psalm 2:11; Psalm 112:1; Psalm 130:3-4; Psalm 147:11; Proverbs 2:5; Isaiah 11:2-3; Isaiah 33:6; Jeremiah 32:38-41; Jeremiah 33:8-9; 1 John 4:18

We're coming to the end of our stay here. My wife will be heading back to Victoria tomorrow. She has someone to meet up with there, and I'll be visiting the folks at North Surrey Chapel on Sunday, and then going back to Victoria as well. So we probably will be back this way next year. And I do thank you for your prayers for my wife. We really see the Lord's hand on her with the health concern that she has, and we're grateful to Him and thankful to you for your prayers. So keep remembering her and ourselves as we plan to return to Bolivia in the month of August for a short term there.

There was one song. A brother who had just come to faith, and I was learning a little bit about the Bible and didn't know very much. And there was one thing that puzzled him. He said, "You know, I can believe that a small group of people and a bunch of animals got saved in the ark, but I can't believe that the Israelites carried that ark for 40 years all through the desert." Yeah, **wrong ark**. That was an ark, but that was Noah's ark. That was the ark of the covenant, right? So sometimes we get confused. And sometimes we have, you know, a skewed picture of things, and we end up making some mistakes.

And there's one phrase in the Bible that I think has been often misunderstood, perhaps more than any other phrase. And it's the phrase, the fear of the Lord. And in 1927, the atheist and philosopher Bertrand Russell published his famous book, *Why I Am Not a Christian*. And he, like many others, profoundly misunderstood the **fear of God**. And here's a quote from his book: "Religion is based mainly and primarily on fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown. Fear is the basis of the whole thing." Unfortunately, many have understood the fear of God in a similar way.

And there's some deconstructing to do. Now, the Hebrew word that's used to translate fear in Hebrew—I don't know much Hebrew, but that word is *yare*. It's commonly translated fear, but it's more than that feeling of being afraid of something. That's maybe part of it, but it's a much bigger concept. And we find in the Old Testament that word parallels with others like to **love**, to **cleave to**, to **serve**, to **obey**, to **walk in**, to **rejoice**. And the fear of God is a very wide concept. And it basically encompasses what it means to **know God**, to **believe in Him**

and to **submit our lives to Him**. And very frequently in the Old Testament, we have this phrase, the fear of God. And it's helpful that we understand what that means. It's all over the Bible. And the Bible says it's the **beginning of wisdom**.

[Ecclesiastes 12:13 NKJV]

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all.

The New Testament also, although not as much, but it also mentions and encourages the fear of God. However, the fear of God is **not** to be afraid of God. If you look it up in a dictionary, you may think it means to have a dread of God. But that's not really what the Bible is talking about. And it's used in the Bible in very fascinating ways. And I'd like to look at some of them with you. Let's go to Exodus chapter 20 and verse 18.

[Exodus 20:18-20 NKJV]

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die."

²⁰ 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."

Now pay close attention. Verse 20, and Moses said to the people, "**Do not fear**, for God has come to test you so that **His fear** may be before you so that you may not sin." Interesting. Moses says, "Do not fear. Do not be afraid because I want you to learn to fear God." And somehow there's a contrast between being afraid of God and fearing God. If you have the fear of God, you will not be afraid of Him. Do not fear so that this **right fear** may be in you. Now, there's a kind of fear that we should avoid, and there's a right kind that we should learn about. It's the wrong kind that makes people run from Him. Maybe that's the kind that Adam had. It made him afraid, and he hid. Ungodly fear drives people away from God, but that's not the kind of fear the Bible commends.

Go to Genesis chapter 28. We have another mention here. Genesis 28 verse 10.

[Genesis 28:10-17 NKJV]

¹⁰ Now Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set. And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep.

¹² Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: "I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. ¹⁴ Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. ¹⁵ Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you."

¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." ¹⁷ And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"

What did the Lord say to Jacob? Well, He gave him this incredible promise of blessing. And we have a remarkable list of the wonderful things that God pledges to do for Jacob. Not one word of threat. It's promise after promise of **pure grace**. And Jacob fears. Now, Jacob's fear has nothing to do with facing a God who wants to obliterate him. Rather, he is in the presence of a God who wants to bless him, to prosper him, and to protect him. And God is so great that His presence brings fear to him. But it's a fear of a God that's coming to him in **goodness**. It's coming to him with promises of prospering and protecting. And there's a fear, but it's not because he's scared, but it's the **awesomeness** of God; it's the greatness of His person that produces this reverential fear of God.

Deuteronomy chapter 10 verse 12. We're going to look at several scriptures, so you might just be ready to do that. Verse 12:

[Deuteronomy 10:12 NKJV]

"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 and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,

Notice that this verse brings two concepts together: they are **fear** and **love**. Now you say, "Well, just a minute, how is it possible to love someone that you are afraid of?" How do you do that? Here's a fearing that is somehow related to loving. Somehow this fear doesn't make you run from God. It doesn't scare you away. It causes you to draw near. One theologian notes that in Deuteronomy, the fear of God is equivalent to loving God. And he defines the fear of God as a surrender to the will of God. So the fear of God is like a **big cupboard** where there's a lot of stuff and it holds many things. So inside that cupboard are loving and serving God with all your heart; serving a God who comes to you with His goodness and His mercy.

Psalm chapter 2, second Psalm, verse 11.

[Psalm 2:11 NKJV]
Serve the LORD with fear,
And rejoice with trembling.

Well, what do you think of that? Here the word fear is paired with **rejoicing**. It seems that we'll have to put the word rejoice in the cupboard as well, along with these other words, because the fear of God includes rejoicing. Do you think the fear of God has something to do with joy? Well, it turns out to be a **joyful fear**, a fear that fills you with joy. Okay. Psalm 112, verse 1.

[Psalm 112:1 NKJV]
Praise the LORD!
Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,
Who delights greatly in His commandments.

So here's another word we're going to have to stick in this cupboard. The word is **delight**. The fear of God is related to delight. It's a delightful fear, one that does not produce dread, but joy. Again, the phrase here does not allow us to reduce the fear of God to terror or dread of God. No, it's not that. Here, fear is connected with delight.

Psalm 130, verse 3.

[Psalm 130:3-4 NKJV]

³ If You, LORD, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?
⁴ But there is forgiveness with You,
That You may be feared.

God is a forgiving God. Therefore, we should fear Him. Well, that would make no sense if fearing God meant to be afraid of Him. God's generosity in forgiving does not make us afraid of God. It generates **gratitude**. It generates a desire to honor Him, a desire that is born from an appreciation of His mercy and His goodness. That's what the fear of God means, according to this passage.

Psalm 147, verse 11.

[Psalm 147:11 NKJV]

The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear Him,
In those who hope in His mercy.

Notice the two phrases in this verse. How does one who fears God act? Well, they put their **trust** and their **hope** in God's mercy. And here the fear of God is a response to His mercy. It's a response of faith and trust. Notice how many different things are included within the concept of fearing God.

Let's go to Proverbs 9 because this is the classic verse on the topic. Proverbs chapter 9, verse 10.

[Proverbs 9:10 NKJV]

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

The fear of the Lord is the foundation of wisdom. It's the cornerstone of a godly life. Now, a characteristic of Hebrew poetry is **parallelism**. What's that? That's where the poet makes a statement and then he repeats the idea with different words. He says the same thing twice

but uses different words to say the same thing. You have two ideas in parallel. In our poetry, we rhyme words. In Hebrew poetry, they rhyme **ideas**. They say it once, and then they say it again with another different phrase. So that's a characteristic of Hebrew poetry. So first of all, you have the phrase, the fear of the Lord. And notice the parallel phrase in the second part of the verse. It is the phrase, the knowledge of the Holy One.

So what does the fear of God mean? It means **knowing God**. It means having knowledge of God. You see that? We have the two phrases in parallel here. The one is complementing the other. Basically, they mean the same thing. We see this as well in Proverbs 2, verse 5. Notice, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find—what?

[Proverbs 2:5 NKJV]

Then you will understand the fear of the LORD,
And find the knowledge of God.

So here's something else we have to put in the cupboard. Fearing God is **knowing God**. It's having knowledge. It's having a relationship with God. It involves friendship with God. Sadly, many people have been instilled with a fear of God that says, "If you step out of line, He will nail you." And they have picked up a distorted view of what that means—an angry and a judgmental God, one who does not control His anger. No, that's not it. And many people live with a dark picture of God, a God who delights to judge. And how much religiosity is driven by this concept of God? How much legalism is driven by a view of God who is implacable, impossible to please? Legalism grows out of a failure to understand God's goodness and God's mercy.

Isaiah chapter 11. Let's keep on moving through the Old Testament here. Chapter 11, here's a prophecy about Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Isaiah 11:2.

[Isaiah 11:2-3 NKJV]

² The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. ³ His delight is in the fear of the LORD, And He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, Nor decide by the hearing of His ears;

Did you get that? His **delight** is in the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is not something you want to avoid. It's something that you want to delight in. Again, we see the word delight

connected to the fear of God. And this is the Son of God Himself. He found his delight and his joy in the fear of God. It's a joyful fear. It's a fear mixed with delight.

Isaiah 33, verse 6.

[Isaiah 33:6 NKJV]

Wisdom and knowledge will be the stability of your times, And the strength of salvation; The fear of the LORD is His treasure.

Who would not like to find a treasure? Well, here are riches for the having. If someone learns to fear God, he has found a **treasure**. Far from being something negative, the fear of God is something of great value and worth. It is something you do not want to miss. Right? It's a treasure.

Jeremiah, chapter 32. After explaining the new covenant, we read these verses, Jeremiah 32, verse 38.

[Jeremiah 32:38-41 NKJV]

³⁸ They shall be My people, and I will be their God; ³⁹ then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them. ⁴⁰ And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me. ⁴¹ Yes, I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will assuredly plant them in this land, with all My heart and with all My soul.'

This fear that the Spirit of God implants in believers so that they may not depart from Me is **not** a fear of punishment. It's not that they will not dare to turn for fear of what He will do to them. No, this is not talking about punishment; this is talking about the **goodness of God**. The good things that God will do for His people. Verse 41: "Yes, I will rejoice over them to do them good." And I will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and with all my soul.

This is one of the most exuberant and extravagant affirmations of the goodness of God in the whole of the Bible. And God says, "I will throw myself heart and soul into doing them good." He's going to give it everything He's got. He's passionate about this. He's going to pour out

His goodness like a **tsunami** as if there's nothing that gives Him greater joy. Does this sound like a God that you want to run away from? No, not at all. Not at all.

Next chapter. Chapter 33, verse 8 says:

[Jeremiah 33:8-9 NKJV]

⁸ I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me, and I will pardon all their iniquities by which they have sinned and by which they have transgressed against Me. ⁹ Then it shall be to Me a name of joy, a praise, and an honor before all nations of the earth, who shall hear all the good that I do to them; they shall fear and tremble for all the goodness and all the prosperity that I provide for it.'

Now here we have fear and trembling. And why is there fear and trembling here? It's not because God is coming to judge. It's because God's unbelievable goodness is totally **off the charts**. No one has ever seen a God like this. His goodness is so extraordinary it makes people tremble. Seeing His goodness. Are you getting the picture of what this God is all about? We're talking about a goodness of a kind that no one has ever heard of before. He is so good that people are totally blown away.

Now, some people think that there are two sides to God. There's the grace that makes us love Him, and there's the holiness that makes us tremble before Him. There's the benevolent part, and there's the scary part. I don't think the Bible supports that idea. In scripture, even the **goodness of God** makes people tremble. Even His goodness makes people tremble. What do you think of that? Everything, everything about God is so huge, so great, so great, so awesome that no matter how you look at Him, from where you look at Him, it's overwhelming. He is so great and so awesome, it makes people tremble. It's not a trembling of dread. It's a trembling of delight. The wonderfulness of God is amazing. It's a trembling of amazement.

We see then that the fear of God includes many things. There's a wideness to this phrase. It encompasses many things. Words like **love, joy, delight, knowing God, treasure, awe**. All of these words are included in the biblical concept of the fear of God. It does not mean to be terrified of Him. The phrase basically describes everything that makes up a godly life. The fear of God implies faith, reverence, love, service, obedience, joy, awe—everything that should be present in a life of faithfulness to God. One scholar points out that the fear of God is the **soul of godliness**.

I was once in a national conference in Bolivia, at which I was invited to speak along with others, and we celebrated the Lord's Supper. And one brother got up to share from the word, and he pointed out that when we gather, it's not that where there's two or three that the Lord comes to be in our midst. He said, "That's not the biblical concept. When we worship, we go into His presence. We enter into the holy place." And suddenly as he shared, I saw myself. It was like this picture that the Lord gave me, and I saw myself climbing some stairs, and at the top I came to the throne room of God. The majestic Lord was sitting on His throne, and before I knew it, I was prostrate on the floor. And what I felt is very hard to explain. And the best thing that I can say is that it was a combination of **trembling and delight**. It was a powerful moment that was overwhelming. It was frightening, and it was wonderful.

The utter greatness of God overwhelms and inspires awe mixed with joy. It's a **scary delight**. It's a fascinating combination of emotions, right? We're overwhelmed by His greatness, and yet we're drawn because of His mercy and love. The greatness of God could frighten us. His love draws us. We tremble before Him, but it's a trembling with joy, right? It's a fascinating combination of emotions.

John Bunyan was an English writer, a Puritan preacher, best remembered by his book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, one of the most significant books in the history of the church. He was an extraordinary preacher of the gospel. John Owen, one of the finest theologians of England, said, "I would gladly give up all my learning if I could preach like that man." Bunyan wrote about 60 books. In 1678, he wrote a treatise on the fear of God, a classic work. Listen to what Bunyan said. I quote, I quote: "Godly fear flows from a sense of the love and kindness of God to the soul. Where there is no sense of hope of the kindness and mercy of God by Jesus Christ, there can be none of this fear, but rather wrath and despair." Bunyan suggests that it's the enemy who seeks to produce this negative kind of fear. He goes on to say this: "Godly fear flows from some sense or hope of mercy from God by Jesus Christ. And in this true tenderness, softness, and endearedness of affection to God lies the very essence of this fear of the Lord." Well, maybe that's not what we expected from Bunyan. Bunyan says that the fear of God is a response to His mercy and His grace.

Jonathan Edwards was one of the great preachers and theologians in the history of North America. He lived in the 1700s. He wrote these words: "God is arrayed in infinite brightness, a brightness that doesn't create pain as the light of the sun pains the eyes to behold. It rather fills with excess of joy and delight." Indeed, no man can see God and live. Why? Because, Edwards says, the sight of such glory would overpower nature because the joy and pleasure in beholding would be too strong for a frail nature. According to Edwards, what

should impact us about God is the overwhelming **beauty, perfection, and goodness** found in Him.

Now, in the Bible, there are many accounts of people who had an encounter with God, and it was always an experience that shook them and filled them with awe and with fear. They were often devastated by God's presence, but there was always a word that God had for them. What did God say every time? "**Fear not,**" right? Do not be afraid. Hmm. It's perfectly normal to fear God, the one who sustains the universe. His greatness would frighten anyone. But don't run away. You shouldn't run away. Stay and learn about the greatness of His mercy, the greatness of His love, the greatness of His goodness, the greatness of His tenderness. Stay. Stay. Become a worshiper of this God. Be filled with awe at the wonder of a God of infinite power and infinite goodness.

So these two visions of God need to be brought together: the powerful and transcendent God who is wrapped in unapproachable majesty and the merciful, forgiving God of goodness who attracts us with His kindness and His gentleness. Someone referred to these two aspects as the **windshield wiper** of the soul. We often vacillate between two divergent visions of God. How do we resolve the tension? There's an event that reframes everything about God: the **Incarnation** of the transcendent God in the person of Christ. The Lord Jesus is the human life of God. In Christ, we see the human face of God. In Christ, everything is brought together.

Listen to this writer. He says this: "The gospel begins with Jesus, the incarnate. If you don't begin with Jesus, you don't begin. You don't begin with anything except roads with dead ends. We know little or nothing about God and what we know is wrong unless we begin with Jesus. If you do not see God in the face of Jesus, you see something other than God and different. Because He is the image of the invisible God. He is the one who said, 'If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.'" So the pillar of every doctrinal belief we have at its core is the understanding that God is exactly as Christ revealed Him to be. Without Him, we are unable to understand God correctly.

The apostle Paul dares to say that all things hold together in Christ. Outside of Him, even our best theories fall apart. Our best ideas about God fall apart. Our understanding and experience of God is grounded in the revelation that God has given to us in the person of His Son. Listen to Martin Luther: "We were totally unable to come to the recognition of the Father's favor and grace, except through the Lord Christ, who is the mirroring image of the Father's heart." And then he says this: "Without Christ, we see nothing in God but an angry and terrible judge." We need to see God through the lens of Christ. We're only able to get an accurate picture of God by looking at Christ. Christ allows us to contemplate God without

being blinded by His overwhelming magnificence. We see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And the moment when the heart of God is seen most clearly is when they seized Him, spat on Him, flogged Him, and crucified Him. Look at Him agonizing. He's on the cross out of love for us because that is what God is like. Look at Him saying to those who cried out for His blood, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they're doing." Look at the Almighty suffering to save us from our sins because that is what God is like.

There's a God who shocks us with His greatness and His power. But now He shocks us with His humility and with His love. This is a God who truly amazes us at every turn. Our God is truly an **awesome God**. There's one more passage I want to consider, and that's 1 John 4, verse 18.

[1 John 4:18 NKJV]

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.

There is a fear that God desires to cast out, dispel. It's a cringing, crippling, anxious fear. The love of God would drive that kind of fear away. **Perfect love** casts out fear. Now, it's wonderful to be loved. It's wonderful to be greatly loved. What is it like to be perfectly loved? To be loved with perfect love. What does that look like? What does it mean to be overtaken by a love that does not falter, that does not waver and will never give up? A love that is without limit and without end. What does it mean to be overtaken by a love that is pure, unadulterated and unhindered? What does that mean? For one thing, it means that fear has to go. Fear has to pack up and leave. Fear, as in dread, cannot coexist with this love. Perfect love casts out fear. And it leaves us speechless, dumbfounded, and it turns us into worshipers, into servants, captivated by a love that knows no measure.

The Spirit of God would teach us to have reverence before God, but it seems that above all, He wants us to learn to **trust** in the tender, loving kindness of God. And He teaches us to cry out, "**Abba, Father.**" That's a family word. That's an intimate term. That's a term of a child who has trust and confidence in the love of a father. And we are not instructed by the Holy Spirit to say, "Your Majesty." We are instructed to say, "Abba." Amen. That's because we don't have to be afraid. The fear that we have is a reverent, confident fear. Right.

It once happened in a simple African village that one night a fire broke out in one of the small dwellings. It was made of straw and it very quickly burned to the ground. All inside this little hut were asleep when the fire started and all perished with the exception of one

little boy. As the fire burned, one unknown member of the tribe dashed into this dwelling and pulled the little child to safety. Moments later the entire dwelling was consumed by the fire. The little child emerged unscathed and when dawn came, the elders were confronted with a difficult problem. The man who had rescued the child had disappeared and now it was up to the elders to decide what should be done with this child?

And everyone thought that it was a clear sign of divine providence that his life had been preserved. And they began to argue about who would have the privilege and honor of raising this child in their family. The child was evidently favored by God. A number of people came forward. They presented reasons why they should be the ones to raise this child. And finally, a man stood up. He was a comparatively unimportant member of the tribe, and he insisted that he had a superior claim to all others for the care and the adoption of this child. "What right do you have to the child?" he was asked. "You are not wealthy. You are not a prominent member of the tribe." The man had one answer. He showed them his hands. They were burned and scarred. He was the one who had rescued the child.

What greater evidence of love and devotion for the child could anyone have greater than that? The man's claim was unrefutable. Who could have a superior claim than the man with the burned hands? What gives God a claim over our love and devotion? Why does He deserve the devotion of our hearts that we would fear Him and love Him and trust in Him and delight in Him and serve Him? There's simply one answer. He alone has **scars in His hands**, right? Scars acquired because He loved us and suffered to save us. Scars that prove the astonishing caliber of His love. Do we need any more evidence than that? Could we ever doubt the reality of God's love and goodness? This is the God we will serve. We will serve Him with godly fear and devotion. We have clear evidence of the love that is in His heart. We can see it on His hands.

Heavenly Father, we thank You that You are a God that deserves our worship, our reverence, our obedience, our submission, our joy, our everything. We thank You that You are wonderful in every way. Teach us to fear You as You deserve. Teach us to know You and to rejoice in having such a wonderful God as Father and Savior. We give You praise in the name of Your Son. Amen.