

The Fear of God

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Scripture:
Jeremiah
32:36-41

Series: Soul Care, Part
Two: (3/4)

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I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. (Jeremiah 32:39)

My first task today is to make the case that the fear of God is a friend. For many people, the fear of God sounds more like an enemy than a friend, “Fearing God? Surely this is something that we are trying to get away from, something we are trying to get rid of!” It sounds more like a dysfunction than a sign of spiritual health.

But the Bible presents the fear of God as a friend; a friend who will do us a great deal of good: “I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them” (Jeremiah 32:39).

God is speaking to his own people, a people who are in a covenant relationship with him. Look at what he says: “My people will fear me. If they don’t fear me, it will mean trouble for the next generation.”

Then God says, “This will be for their own *good* and for the good of their children, and this will be *forever*.” That means there will never be a time on earth or in heaven when God’s people will not fear him in holy wonder and reverence and awe.

I want to do what I can to dispel the idea that there is a God to be feared in the Old Testament and a God to be loved in the New Testament, and that the fear of God is therefore not for us.

The evolutionary view of the Bible lies at the heart of this view of the Bible, that in ancient times people had a primitive view of a God to be feared, but that in more enlightened times people have come to a mature view of a God to be loved. That is a complete misunderstanding of what the Bible is and what the Bible says.

God never changes. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We are to fear him as we love him, and we are to love him as we fear him. The Old Testament is full of the love of God. Read the book of Deuteronomy or the book of Hosea.

The New Testament speaks often of the fear of God

i. *Fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell* (Mat. 10:28). Jesus said this about his Father in heaven, and he said it to his disciples!

ii. The command to *fear God* is a New Testament command (1 Pet. 2:17).

iii. In the New Testament we read, *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God* (Heb. 10:31). And these words were written to Christian believers!

iv. Fearing God was a mark of the early church at its best: *And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it [the church] multiplied* (Acts 9:31).

Notice how the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit are joined together. So, clearly we need to understand this fear of the Lord that brings good to the life of a Christian believer.

The fear of God is a cord of three strands: The splendor of the God's glory, the reality of God's judgment, and the wonder of God's love. When a person grasps the splendor, the reality, and the wonder, he or she will be brought into the good that the Bible calls "the fear of the Lord."

The Fear of God: A Cord of Three Strands

1. The Splendor of God's Glory

Think about who God is... the God who creates the moons and the stars. He speaks and worlds come into being. Not only does he create, but he upholds the universe by his own power.

Jeremiah 32 gives us glimpses of the glory of God. The heading at the beginning of the chapter in the English standard version (ESV) says, "Jeremiah buys a field during the siege."

Jerusalem was a city under siege (32:2). The Babylonian army had circled the city. They were piling up earth building mounds so that they could launch an assault on the city (32:24).

Jeremiah had already prophesied that the city would fall, "Thus says the Lord: 'Behold, I am giving the city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall capture it'" (32:3).

That was what eventually happened. But King Zedekiah, in Jerusalem, didn't want to hear it, so Jeremiah was placed under house arrest in the palace: He was shut up "in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the King of Judah" (32:2).

Think about it: What happens to the economy of a country when an army is laying siege to its capital city? The economy goes into melt down. Who wants to buy land in a place that is

about to be taken over by enemies? Values collapse. Trading stops. All commerce grinds to a halt.

Jeremiah did an extraordinary and very public thing: He bought a field: “Hanamel my cousin came to me in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, ‘Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin’” (32:8).

Jeremiah signs the deed. Then he says to his colleague, Baruch, “Take these deeds... and put them in an earthenware vessel, that they may last for a long time: For thus says the Lord, ‘Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land’” (32:14-15).

Buying the field was an action full of hope, like buying stock when the market has crashed. Jeremiah did this because *God* had said, “Houses and fields shall again be bought in this land” (32:15).

Roll the story forward and that is exactly what happened. Who could have guessed, while the siege was going on, that God would bring the might of Babylon – that dominated the world at that time – to nothing?

Who could have guessed that God would put it into the heart of a pagan king called Cyrus to release God’s people and support the rebuilding of Jerusalem? Who could have guessed that God would give his people a thriving economy and that a whole new community would be built?

So, God is sovereign over the economies of nations, “Fields shall be bought for money, and deeds shall be signed and sealed and witnessed... ‘I will restore their fortunes,’ declares the Lord” (32:44).

God is sovereign, not only over the creation of the world, and the sustaining of the world, but also over the history of the world.

So, God is sovereign over disasters that come to nations and sovereign over blessing that comes to nations, “Just as I have brought all this great disaster upon this people, so I will bring upon them all that good that I promised them” (32:42).

God is sovereign over cities and nations. He is sovereign over the gathering and the dispersing of people. He rules over the growth and decline of economies, and he is sovereign over the growth and decline of churches too.

“The seven stars that you saw in my right hand... are the angels of the seven churches” (Rev. 1:20). What else is that but Jesus’ sovereignty over the growth and decline of the church?

“Do you not fear me?’ declares the LORD. ‘Do you not tremble before me?’” (Jer. 5:22). People who don’t fear the Lord, have not seen the splendor of his glory.

The Reality of God's Judgment

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ... Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. (2 Corinthians 5:10-11)

The world doesn't know anything at all of the judgment of God. Paul was a Christian believer, and God moved him to write Romans 8: "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

Paul knew that there was no condemnation for him. But he also knew that he would stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and as a Christian believer, he spoke of "knowing the fear of the Lord."

Christians have a profound awareness that we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. This Christ knows everything about us. He knows the things that are hidden from others.

The Church of England liturgy has a prayer called "Collect for Purity":

Almighty God, before whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy holy spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name: through Christ our Lord. Amen

Think about this with me. You and I are going to stand before the judgment seat of almighty God, before whom all hearts are open, all desires are known, and from whom no secrets are hid! You don't even know the full extent of your heart, but it is all known to him.

There was a soldier in the First World War who was nicknamed "Woodbine Willie." He was a man who had no place for Christ in his life.

But one night he had a dream in which he saw himself on the Day of Judgment looking into the eyes of Christ. It was so vivid that it led him to faith in Jesus Christ. He wrote a poem, that I heard years ago, and have carried in my memory.

There ain't no books and there ain't no thrones; It Him you've got to see
Its Him, just Him that is the Judge of blokes like you and me
And boys I'd sooner shrivel up in the flames of a burning hell
Than stand and look into His eyes, and hear His voice say, 'Well?'

You might say, "Well, I can understand why Woodbine Willie would react that way." But the apostle Paul had come to Christ too. Why should he know the fear of the Lord as he thinks about the judgment?

Thomas Manton deals with this question and he gives three answers:

1. The judgment of God was once our due: Grace is not a right. What I deserve, as a matter of justice, is an eternity under the judgment of God.

2. We still deserve it, even after grace has made a change in our condition: The reason that there is no condemnation for believers is not that we have become so pure and holy that there is nothing in us that could be condemned; it is that God in his mercy chooses not to press charges against us. He forgives us, for the sake of Christ.

There is enough sin in the life of every Christian this past week to condemn us to hell. If God were to judge any of our lives now, apart from Jesus Christ, we would be lost forever.

3. We are still in the process of being saved. I know I shall be saved, but it is a difficult thing to save me: A Christian is a person who knows something not only of his or her past sins that are forgiven, but of the sins that remain, from which he or she is in daily need of being saved.

There is nothing self-righteous about a true Christian. At our best, we hang on the mercy of God that is ours in Jesus Christ. Apart from that we would be gone forever.

The Wonder of God's Love

But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. (Psalm 130:4)

The fear of God that does us so much good arises out of our knowledge of the grace, mercy, love, forgiveness that leads the person who receives it to fear the Lord. Forgiveness... that you may be feared!

You see the love of God and how much it cost on the cross and you say, "How could I sin against love like this?"

Andrew Bonar writes, "It has been much impressed upon me that, if convinced of sin at all, I must be so by the view of it in Christ's love."

I've adapted a description of the fear of God from an old writer called John Brown, who wrote a massive commentary on the first book of Peter, where we have the command to fear God (1 Peter 2:17):

To fear God is to love Him so that His frown would be your greatest dread and His smile would be your greatest delight.

A person who fears God is one who has seen something of his glory, his judgment and his love. Can you see now why Jeremiah speaks of the fear of God as something that lasts

forever? Because even in heaven God's people will fear him as we love him and love him as we fear him.

Glory: Heaven will be filled with the splendor of his glory. The pure in heart will see God, and when we do, we will fall on our faces casting any crowns before him in awe and in worship.

Judgment: Heaven will remain a happy and holy place forever because of God's judgment on unrepentant sinners that goes on forever in hell.

Love: Heaven will be full of the knowledge of his love. Glory, judgment, and love – forever we will fear him; forever we will love him. “I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever” (Jer. 32:39).

OMG culture

We live in what I'm going to call the OMG culture. We are awash with reality shows where people invoke the name of God to express their surprise when the reveal comes at the end.

It strikes me as a symptom of how far our culture has gone from the fear of God, when you think how the Jews held God in such high esteem that they would not even pronounce his name.

In our culture, people pronounce the letters G-O-D and have absolutely no idea of the glory, the judgment, or the love of the One of whom they speak.

If you are a Christian I challenge you to make this resolve: That if you are a Christian, you demonstrate that you know something of the glory, the judgment, and the love of God, so that whenever you speak the name of God, or Jesus, or Christ, you speak his name in a way that shows that you know him, you fear him, and you love him.

Will you make that resolve as part of your Christian testimony?

Three Applications

1. The blessing

Blessed is the one who fears the LORD always. (Proverbs 28:14)

Fearing the Lord will give you wisdom: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom* (Psa. 111:10).

Fearing the Lord will keep you from sin: *The fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning* (Ex. 20:20).

Fearing the Lord will motivate you in evangelism: *Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men (2 Cor. 5:11).*

All kinds of good will flow into the life of the person who fears the Lord.

2. The promise

I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. (Jeremiah 32:40)

Notice what the Lord says here to his people: He will put this godly fear in their hearts. Why? That they may not turn against him.

The clear implication is that without the fear the Lord, believing people might easily turn against the Lord. This is part of the promise of the new heart. God is able to give this to you.

God says, "I will put the fear of me in their hearts." This is a wonderful promise! If we feared God more, we'd sin less. If we had a greater sense of the reality of his judgment, we would do more to advance the gospel. If God carried more weight in our lives, we'd make wiser decisions.

3. The prayer

Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name. (Psalm 86:11)

Lord, my heart is pulled in all kinds of directions. Unite my heart to fear your name!

Put more of this fear of you that arises from the splendor of your glory, the reality of your judgment, and the wonder of your love in my heart!

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