

The Grace of Fearing God

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. ²⁹ For our God is a consuming fire. (Heb. 12:28-29)

The French General Ferdinand Foch, considered the leader most responsible for winning World War One, once said, "He who fears God need fear nothing else, and he who fears not God needs to fear everything else." Similar to that is the inscription in Westminster Abbey on the tomb of John Mair, Lord Lawrence: "He feared Man so little, because he feared God so much". The fear of God is the one fear that conquers every other fear, the one good fear that drives out evil fear. The fear of the Lord is the only commanded fear in the Bible.

In the middle of the Covid-19 epidemic, many, many people are gripped, even paralysed, by fear. The threat of death being in the air has made everyday life into a nightmare for many people. And it has revealed a lot about people.

Fear reveals a lot about us. It reveals what we love. It reveals what we want to have and what we would hate to lose. It reveals what we would hate to have and don't want to receive. It reveals what is important to us, and what is not. But most of all, fear reveals our beliefs about who or what controls life. It reveals just what we actually believe about God. Is He involved? Is He good? Are His promises trustworthy? Can you live life in the face of danger? My greatest fear very likely reveals who and what I worship.

In fact, God wants there to be only one fear in our lives. God wants us to have the fear that drives out all fear, and that is the fear of the Lord. We are commanded to fear the Lord in Scripture, and when it is not commanded, it is commended, shown to be the best way to live, the beginning of knowledge, the whole duty of man, what God requires of us, the source of satisfaction, and confidence, and hope. As we've been seeing, the fear of the Lord is also the true meaning of revival: when godly fear comes upon an individual soul, or even corporately.

Last week we saw the meaning of the fear of the Lord: the right response to God's nature – His greatness and goodness. And we saw that the only place where we properly understand God's power and God's gentleness, God's justice and God's mercy, God's hatred and God's love is at the Cross of Christ, where there is forgiveness. We saw Psalm 130 say, but there is forgiveness with you, that you may be feared. Only the Gospel of salvation and forgiveness saves us from being either dreadfully afraid, or from being casual and flippant. It is in Christ, and in the gospel, that goodness and greatness embrace and we learn what Psalm 2 means: to rejoice with trembling.

Today we want to answer the question, how do we get this fear? There's a great danger with this doctrine. We may think that fearing God is something within our grasp. Fearing God might be something we think we can do by trying hard, by trying to feel more reverent, by being more respectful. And though we'll see next week there is a place for deliberately changing your posture before God, on its own, our efforts to manufacture the fear of the Lord will be what Paul describes in Colossians 2:23 as things which "indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, *false* humility, and neglect of the body *but are* of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. (Col. 2:23). If all we do is will ourselves to feel more respectful, feel or seem more reverent, all we will do is create more man-made religion and phoney ritual. And of course, the world is full of that. Across the globe, and for centuries, people are bowing, venerating, trembling, bringing gifts or offerings to placate, standing in solemn silence, dressing in their most respectful garb. But that doesn't mean there is a reality behind all that reverence or that there is something true that they are responding to. Humans are good at religious emotions: be they ecstasy or fear.

In Scripture, the fear of the Lord is not something we make; it is something we receive through a very precious concept. This special thing or idea is the great secret of truly fearing the Lord. We'll find it in Hebrews 12, particularly the last two verses.

We're diving into two verses here at the end of a chapter, and if we're not careful, and it can feel like we are joining the tail-end conversation that has been going on without us for 30 minutes and we could end up misunderstanding what we're hearing. So let me do a quick summary of the conversation in Hebrews before we get to these verses.

The writer has been urging his readers not to contemplate returning to what is now Judaism without a Messiah. The whole book shows why Jesus is the unique Prophet, Priest and King, and why going back to Temple worship is to forsake life itself.

Throughout the book, he gives five serious warnings in the book not to draw back, but to draw near to God in Yeshua, and this is the last of those five, beginning in verse 18.

To make this warning, he uses an image. He contrasts two mountains which really summarise the argument of the whole book. The first mountain was Mount Sinai, picturing the giving of the Law, and the whole of the Old Covenant without Messiah Jesus. The second mountain is Mount Zion, picturing the new covenant in Messiah Jesus which will eventually take us to Heaven. The writer tells his readers to understand the difference between going back to the one, or drawing near to the other. One mountain shook the earth, but the other mountain will shake the cosmos when it finally comes.

This brings us to our verses in verse 28 and 29, where his conclusion is to come to Christ, come to Mount Zion, where you will truly fear the Lord. Hebrews 12:28-29 is going to give us two essentials about the fear of the Lord: the meaning of the true fear of the Lord, and the means of the true fear of the Lord, what it is, and how we get it.

I. The Meaning of the True Fear of the Lord

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. ²⁹ For our God is a consuming fire.

The last part of verse 28 and into verse 29 gives us maybe the best New Testament description of the fear of the Lord: “serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear”.

The word translated *serve* is a form of the word *latreuo*, which means to perform your service of worship. It's a word associated with the priests doing their duties in the Temple. The idea is your service of worship, your whole life's response to God. What you offer God with your life, as Romans 12:1 puts it.

The writer tells us this worship is to be done in a certain way, that renders it acceptable. If you respond to God in His way, then you are worshipping God acceptably. This is the way of worship that pleases God, that God smiles upon, and happily receives.

By implication, if you don't respond to God this way, what kind of worship would it be? It is unacceptable. It will not please God. It will not make the grade.

He now tells us what kind of worship is pleasing and acceptable to God: when we do it with reverence and godly fear. Those two words make up what is known as a hendiadys – two words for one idea, such as “nice and warm”, or “smoke and clouds” “ruined and broken”. Reverence and

godly fear is one idea.

Let me unpack those two words. The word for *reverence* means a careful, serious kind of humility. It's used in 1 Timothy 2:9 for how women should dress. It's where you are aware of the occasion and you show respect, seriousness, self-control, and not proud exhibitionism, proud and loud provocation of others.

This word for *godly fear* is used only one other time in the New Testament, in the same book when it speaks of Jesus Himself, who "in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears... was heard because of His godly fear, (Heb. 5:7) It means a deep, reverent regard for someone, awe and seriousness. This is how Jesus, the God-Man regarded His Father.

But word definitions only go so far. To really understand the meaning, we need the imagination, and that means these two images. If you look back at verses 18 and following, you can see the difference between slavish fear and godly fear, by comparing the two mountains.

When the law was given at Sinai, there was dread and terror, because God showed His pure holiness, and the black darkness of judgement. Moses received the command that not a single man or beast should go up to the mountain or touch it. And should an animal stray and run off and touch the mountain, it was not to be retrieved. It was to be shot with an arrow or stoned. So holy was God's presence, so off-limits was a place where God manifested Himself, that nothing was to go near unless called. A voice came and announced the Ten Commandments, and Israel begged Moses to not let the voice speak anymore, but to go up and be the intermediary.

This was a mountain of God's greatness, but there was no welcome here. You could only keep your distance. It was a manifestation of greatness, but you didn't really want to draw near. Mount Sinai was not a home or a city.

But now comes the new covenant. Mount Zion is the capital of grace and the new covenant. There is no less holiness, and no less judgement, and no less danger. Indeed, as Hebrews keeps showing us, if anything, once Jesus has come, there is more knowledge and a perfect sacrifice which means more culpability, more accountability, and a far greater penalty for rejecting it. Those who imagine the Old Testament is severe, and the New Testament is sweet stand refuted by the book of Hebrews.

But Mount Zion is filled with goodness as well. It is a glorious and welcoming throng, calling on you to come and to stay. Here is a City, where you can live – a home. Here is a family – the church, angels, the saints, the Father, and the welcoming Lord Jesus. The price is someone else's perfection: the life and death of Jesus the Messiah. It includes the holiness of Sinai, but absorbs it in the grace of Jesus. Here is goodness, forgiveness, mercy.

Putting them together we get what we saw last week: the trembling joy, the humble hope, the respectful delight that you have when you experience the true nature of God, and are aware of His presence. Sinai in the background, Zion in the foreground, now we approach. Now we worship acceptably with reverence and godly fear.

Verse 29 reminds us: our God is a consuming fire. His holiness will destroy utterly what is corrupting and evil. He is, as Deuteronomy 4:24 adds, a jealous God. He is not slack, or apathetic, or indifferent, but infinitely zealous in loving what He loves and hating what He hates.

This is the true God of the Bible. If we worship Him with casualness and flippancy, with

lightheartedness and triviality, with frivolity and amusement, it's not acceptable worship. The appropriate response to this God is reverence and awe.

That's the fear of the Lord, taught for us very clearly by the New Testament. But now we come to the real question: how do we get it? What is the means by which we can have this fear of the Lord?

II. The Means of the True Fear of the Lord

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. ²⁹ For our God *is* a consuming fire. (Heb. 12:18-29)

Our text tells us very clearly how we can worship acceptably with reverence and fear. Notice those words "by which". Your translation may have "through which" or "by it", or 'thus'. Whatever comes before those words is the instrument, the means by which we have the fear of the Lord. What is that thing?

The text says "let us have grace", by which we worship acceptably. Four times in the NT, this means "be grateful" and two times it means "receive grace". Some translations render it "be grateful". I think the way the NKJV renders it is the idea: receive grace. Accept and receive the grace that God gives.

What is the secret of fearing the Lord? The answer is: grace. Fearing the Lord is not something we can get right on our own. It is not a work we can produce apart from God. It is incorrect to speak of someone who has not accepted grace as "God-fearing" person. Here we are told very clearly that the secret of fearing God is grace, grace that is received.

Grace is a wonderful word. In the Hebrew it means to stoop down. It is a superior bending down, like a king bending to kiss a child's head, or superior coming down to meet the needs of his inferiors. In Greek it means a gift, favour, kindness, goodwill.

Grace is God's kind favour both to His inferiors and to His enemies. He condescends to finiteness, stoops to deal with weakness, even comes to forgive sinfulness. And grace always comes with gifts: what we need, and what we don't deserve. In the New Testament, sometimes that gift of grace is salvation itself, the gift of forgiveness and eternal life. Sometimes it is the gift of enablement, providing strength for His people, or help to perform a service. But always it is something we could not have done on our own, nor deserved on our own. God then steps in, and gives us what we need, but couldn't have earned, what we need, but didn't merit.

There's a simple and elegant secret to the idea of grace, if you are going to receive it. If you miss this, you will stumble over grace, or reject it, or miss it or neglect it. This is how grace works. God gets all the credit for giving it, and you get all the help in receiving it. Simple, right? Too simple for proud hearts. We want it perfectly symmetrical: we get some credit and some help, and God gets some credit, and also some benefit from us. No, says Scripture. If you want the credit, you can't have grace. God must get all the glory, all the honour, all the admiration as the Giver, as the Benefactor. And you must get all the help, all the strength, all the benefit as the Receiver, the Beneficiary. If you will humble yourself to be 100% the recipient, and let God be 100% the giver, you shall have grace.

Remember the text from Psalm 50 which illustrates this so well: Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me." (Ps. 50:15)

Spurgeon's comments: "Here is a compact, a covenant that God enters into with you who pray to him, and whom he helps. He says, "You shall have the deliverance, but I must have the glory. You

shall pray; I will bless, and then you shall honour my holy name." Here is a delightful partnership: we obtain that which we so greatly need, and all that God getteth is the glory which is due unto his name.

So, what is the grace that God gives which brings the fear of the Lord?

There are principally two graces. The grace of regeneration, and the grace of revelation.

The Grace of Regeneration

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. (Jer. 32:38-40)

The first grace we must have is the gift of a new heart. God says to Israel that He will change their hearts so that they may fear Him. He will put His fear into their hearts. This is the grace of regeneration, the grace of new life.

What does this mean? The human soul in its native state is turned away from God and unresponsive to Him. What it means to be fallen is be like a broken mirror that distorts instead of reflects. When we encounter truth about God, we don't love it. ¹⁹ "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

²⁰ "For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. (Jn. 3:19-20)

Paul says this about fallen man: although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Rom. 1:21)

Here the problem is not information about God, it is desire for God. The unsaved heart doesn't want God. ²⁹ Because they hated knowledge And did not choose the fear of the LORD, (Prov. 1:29)

When the heart is unchanged, God's greatness causes terror, and God's goodness causes presumption. God's greatness is dreaded or defied, and God's goodness is scorned or abused. So the first grace that God must give is applying the death and resurrection of His Son to us, and giving us new hearts with new loves. He cleans us up, breathes in new life, gives us His nature so that we now begin to love what He loves and hate what He hates.

If you know nothing of the fear of the Lord, so that you either despise Him as a threat to your life, or you dismiss Him as dull and boring, then you need a new heart. You will be unresponsive to God's glory as a bat would be to colourful flowers or as a cat would be to a bedtime story. No comprehension, no sensing of it. You cannot get a new heart, but you can sense your need, and sense God's call, and respond. You can say, "Lord, give me the heart I should have to know and love you! Forgive my hard heart, and in Jesus, give me a new one. I feel dead to spiritual realities, so make me alive! Speak life to my soul!"

Let us have grace: let us receive the grace. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, (Eph. 2:8)

This is the first grace we must receive. For the second grace, turn to Deuteronomy 4.

The Grace of Revelation

⁹ "Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen,

and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren, ¹⁰ "especially concerning the day you stood before the LORD your God in Horeb, when the LORD said to me, 'Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and *that* they may teach their children.' (Deut. 4:9-10)

¹⁸ "Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from *the one* before the priests, the Levites. ¹⁹ "And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes, (Deut. 17:18-19)

In both these Scriptures, the fear of the Lord comes as a result of hearing, reading, and even writing God's Word. God's Word is the grace of revelation, God revealing Himself to us.

Once you have a new heart that can love the glory of God, you need to be exposed to the glory of God in the Word of God.

The true fear of the Lord can only happen when there are two elements present: a heart ready and changed to respond rightly to the glory of God, and real exposure to the nature of God. For sunshine to make plants grow, you need the light of the sun, and you need flowers that can photosynthesise that light into growth. The sun does not make rocks grow, because they don't have a nature that can turn sunlight into life. And likewise, you can't put a flower in a dark room with a poster of the sun on the wall and expect it to grow. Real sunlight and an organic flower that feeds on it must come together. We need both exposure to the light of God's person, and then the kind of hearts that love and feed on that glory.

The Bible even asks the question negatively.

Jer 10:7 Who would not fear You, O King of the nations? For this is Your rightful due.

⁴ Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For *You alone are holy.* (Rev. 15:4)

Scripture is saying, who would be foolish enough or strange enough to not fear God? Who would not fear you, if they knew You? Who would stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon and not admire? Who would look up into the Milky Way and not feel humbled and in awe? And so, who would encounter the true God, and not fear? To fear Him is to see Him. To see Him is to hear Him. To hear Him is to eagerly receive His Word.

If you want to grow in the fear of the Lord, then you must receive the grace of revelation in the Word of God. Without revelation, we invent our own gods. We take one aspect of God and blow it out of proportion. We magnify something at the expense of another. We reduce God from infinite to finite. We edit out the parts we don't like. But in the Word of God, we will continually find the balance of God's greatness and God's goodness.

Why don't people fear Him? Because most don't have new hearts. And many of the ones that do, do not receive the grace of revelation, the gift of knowing God through Scripture regularly enough and intensely enough. To receive this grace means to receive it as regularly and as thoroughly as you can. You receive the Word when you worship corporately, because here we read the Word, sing the Word, pray the Word, and preach the Word. You receive the Word when you read it and pray over it at home in private, and in families, when you memorise it, and study it. In a secondary sense, you receive the Word when you seek to obey it and carry it out in all of life. If you are a Christian, I can guarantee you that there is a direct correlation between your fear of the Lord and your intake of God's Word. If your exposure to it is minimal, then you are a flower that receives little sunlight.

To receive this grace, as we will see in Proverbs 2, is not a weak, indifferent reception. My son, if you receive my words, And treasure my commands within you, ² So that you incline your ear to wisdom, *And* apply your heart to understanding; ³ Yes, if you cry out for discernment, *And* lift up your voice for understanding, ⁴ If you seek her as silver, And search for her as *for* hidden treasures; ⁵ Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, And find the knowledge of God. (Prov. 2:1-5)

How are you receiving this grace? How much, how often, how intensely, how persistently, how diligently are you receiving this grace?

The fear that drives out all other fears cannot be manufactured by willpower. The fear of the Lord is that fear. And we might not have ever imagined it, but this fear is a gift. It is a grace-gift of a new heart and new light, regeneration and revelation. If you haven't already, call out to God for this grace, by which you can worship Him acceptably in reverence and godly fear.