

Fear God

by Ben Frearson

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” *Psalm 111:10*

As part of this BASICs series, we’re going to be taking a step back and looking at the foundations of our faith. Why is it that we believe? What is the true nature of our God?

I think Fear is a great place to start. Many of us have grown up with skewed views of what it means to fear God. There are Christians who appear to be terrified of God, scared of what He might do because they’ve committed a sin, convinced that He is punishing them. On the other hand, there are Christians who seem to have no respect for God at all. Personally, I come to God all too often with the wrong attitude, treating Him like a wish-granter to answer my most pressing needs. Demanding that He answer my prayers in the way that I expect.

Neither of these views is the proper approach to fearing God. But the phrase “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” turns up a lot in the books of Job, Psalms and Proverbs. Its clear that to understand who God is, we must start with a fear of Him. Without the correct fear, we cannot hope to understand grace or love.

Some commentators will try and explain verses like these by saying that fear here refers to respect. “Respect of God is the beginning of wisdom.” I don’t think that covers it though. When we read of God’s acts in the Bible, and His encounters with his people, there is definitely more than respect.

In Exodus 20, after Moses has read the 10 Commandments, this happens:

18 Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off **19** and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen;

but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” 20 Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”

Exodus 20:18-20

The people of Israel are scared of *dying* if they hear God’s voice. This is clearly far more than just respect! We can see here too, one reason why fearing God is important: we must fear God to prevent us sinning. He is the judge and he has the power to bring punishment for sin.

Some teachers here may disagree with this, but in my teaching philosophy, I strive for respect from my pupils, but not fear. My goal is for pupils to want to learn, not be frightened into completing their work. Fear may sometimes be an effective motivator towards working hard - in fact, I struggle to complete any work without the fear of missing a deadline - but my primary role as a teacher isn’t to judge or even to discipline, but to teach. My pupils largely respect me (I think), but none would say they fear me, and so there have been times when I’ve turned my back or stepped out of the room, only to find them causing havoc when I return. No matter how loudly I shout, no pupil has ever said that they’re scared they might *die!* So respect alone is not enough for God.

Let’s look back at Exodus 20:20. “**Do not fear**, for God has come to test you, that the **fear of him** may be before you, that you may not sin.” This looks like a paradox at first - don’t fear, so that you will have fear. Moses is telling the Israelites to not be afraid in the current moment (“Do not fear”), because they already have an instinctive fear of God. The fear of God that the Israelites have is a knowledge of who God really is. In Deuteronomy 10:12, they are commanded:

12 “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, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

Deuteronomy 10:12

The fear of God is woven throughout the Bible. If we ignore it because it's a "tricky topic," or because it doesn't fit our own idea of who God should be, then we are picking and choosing which parts of the Bible we read.

There are 3 more encounters that God has with his people that I want to look at that will help us understand what the fear of God looks like.

Exodus

In the chapter before the verse we've just looked at, God comes down on Mount Sinai:

16 On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. 17 Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. 18 Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. 19 And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. 20 The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. 21 And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to look and many of them perish.

Exodus 19:16-21

Here, the mountain itself trembles, the people of Israel cannot approach, and God even warns them of death if they try and look at Him! This power is shown again later in Exodus:

18 Moses said, "Please show me your glory." 19 And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show

mercy. 20 But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” 21 And the Lord said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, 22 and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. 23 Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.”

Exodus 33:18-23

God has chosen Moses as His spokesman, and yet even Moses cannot see the face of God without dying! This is what the fear of the Lord is - He is so good, so radiant that there is no standing before Him. He makes the mountains tremble. Should we dare to treat this God as simply a wish-granter?

Moses comes back down the mountain in chapter 34 and his face is shining. The people of Israel are so frightened that Moses has to wear a veil to cover his face when speaking to them! We are so wrong if we think of God as a tame being. The Israelites know that God is good, as He has led them out of slavery, but they are still terrified of Him.

Isaiah

Moving on to the book of Isaiah, he has a vision of meeting with God:

6 In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” 4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I

dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

Isaiah 6:1-7

Isaiah instantly knows that he is unworthy to be in the presence of God. He naturally recognises that God is one to be feared. This isn't the fear that he *may* be judged. It's the certainty that he'll be judged. Isaiah knows that nothing he can do will save him. He is “lost,” now that he has seen the King. And yet, here we can see that while God is certainly a God to be feared, there is also grace. Isaiah is brought before the all-powerful King, the Lord of hosts of angel armies, a sinful man, deserving of punishment, and yet the King pardons him. He forgives.

Isaiah is a prophet of God, one who in comparison to the rest of the Israelites is pretty good, but he knows instinctively that he is bad when he stands before God.

If you weren't already fearing God from the Exodus story, then you should be now! The entire Earth shows His glory, he pardons sins by touching your lips with hot coals! And he has the right to take away sins. I cannot come up to you and say “I forgive all your sins,” because I don't have the right. A priest can't come and say to you “I forgive all your sins,” because they don't have the right. Neither does the pope, or anyone on Earth. Only God, the one who judges, has that power, because He also has the power to punish us too.

Revelation

Revelation chapter 1 has a fearsome depiction of Jesus:

12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of

the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.

Revelation 1:12-18

John, like Isaiah has nothing to bring before the Lord. He is awestruck by His glory and fearful, for he knows that he is unworthy. This is the God that we worship, His eyes are like fire, His voice is like the roar of many waters. How is it that we have lost this image of God? He isn't a distant, small God. He is a powerful God. He judges all and he has the keys to life and death. It is so easy for us to lose our perspective. When we come before God, we must remember who He really is. He is the Lord of hosts of angels, He is the first and the last, He conquered death.

God is Sovereign

When I read descriptions of God's power, I begin to understand more of His nature. He is Sovereign over the entire universe. His fearsome nature is what makes us aware of our shortcomings. How can we be arrogant enough to put ourselves in front of the King of Creation? We should fall at His feet in praise, humbled by our brokenness.

The writer of Hebrews says:

28 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, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.

Hebrews 12:28

Possibly my favourite fiction story is the Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis. They tell the story of children who find their way into a parallel universe through a wardrobe. In Narnia, they encounter Aslan, the great Lion, who represents Jesus. C.S. Lewis is fantastic at explaining the nature of God, and when I knew that I was preaching on Fearing God, I picked up this book because it puts it so well.

Listen while I read 3 descriptions of Aslan from The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe.

Hearing of Aslan for the first time

And now a very curious thing happened. None of the children knew who Aslan was any more than you do; but the moment the Beaver had spoken [his name] everyone felt quite different.... At the name of Aslan each one of the children felt something jump in its inside. Edmund felt a sensation of mysterious horror. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realise that it is the beginning of the holidays or the beginning of summer.

When the 4 children hear Aslan's name for the first time, they instinctively know that he is someone to be revered. They are fearful but also hopeful.

Who is Aslan

"I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King I tell you."

"I'm longing to meet him," said Peter, "even if I do feel frightened when it comes to the point."

Probably my favourite line in the book is "Course he isn't safe. But he's good." Aslan in the story, like God in real life, is not safe, but he's good. God may be fearsome, but He is just. The reason that Isaiah and John throw themselves down is because they know they are in the wrong, they know there is no use pleading or arguing. No lawyer could get them off the hook. Just like us, they have sinned, and they know that the consequence of that is death.

Meeting Aslan

But as for Aslan himself, the Beavers and the children didn't know what to do or say when they saw him. People who have not been in Narnia sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time. If the children had ever thought so, they were cured of it now. For when they tried to look at Aslan's face they just caught a glimpse of the golden mane and the great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes; and then they found they couldn't look at him and went all trembly...

This is a great description of the fearful reverence we should also hold when we approach Jesus. We love to be in His presence, but we should be overwhelmed by His power. He is not simply a distance, impersonal God, He is the King! When we approach Him, we should fall at His feet, just like Moses, Isaiah and John.

Where does love come in?

Often when the topic of fearing God comes up, we can question whether fear and love can exist at the same time. We know that God loves us, so why should we fear Him? Surely he won't harm us?

Like a parent, who loves their child, sometimes punishments are necessary. Children will learn that if they take certain actions, they will be punished, and they learn to fear that too. They still know that their parents loves them, but they can be afraid of the power that their parents have to exact punishment if they have broken a rule. This is why God's love is so mind-blowing.

God does love us, but that doesn't mean that he loves our actions. We're all sinners, and even though God loves us, just like Moses, Isaiah and John, we are unworthy to be in His presence, separated from Him by our sin. It would be fair and just for God to judge and punish us. There is nothing we can do to alter our fallen state. We deserve death, and fear of God comes from a full understanding of this.

As we know, the story does not end there. It is because of God's fearsome, all powerful nature that we can be redeemed. The only way we can come to Him is through His own sacrifice.

1 John 3:16 says this:

16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

1 John 3:16

Jesus' sacrifice is greater than any of us sacrificing our lives. It is in his power that we're saved. If God wasn't fearsome, and wasn't the powerful King that the Bible proclaims, then His sacrifice would mean nothing. If we don't view God with the reverence that the creator of the universe deserves, then we miss the point of the cross.

In the story of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, Aslan offers his own life in exchange for the life of one of the children. The

Witch is more than happy to make this exchange as she assumes that once Aslan is dead, he will have no power. But this isn't a simple trade. Aslan, like Jesus, has power over the grave and comes back from death. The Witch did not approach Aslan with the fear that he commanded; she put herself above him, and it was through this that she lost.

God is all powerful. He has the power to do whatever he wishes. He cannot be defeated. And yet He sacrificed Himself. He gave it up, to become man, and to die so that we can be with Him. The King of the universe given so that us sinners can be free. That is love, and understanding that begins with fear.

Everything is different

We are to fear God because He is the Judge, he has every right to take our lives and separate Himself from us. When Moses, Isaiah and John come before Him, they know that He is good, and they are not, and they are fully aware of the consequences that can happen. But though God is fearsome, He is also loving. Instead of our right punishment, God has given us the gift of life, so that, as it says in 1 John 2:28 we can:

“abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.”

1 John 2:28

The cross gives us the right to approach Him with confidence, knowing that we are forgiven. God is powerful, but at the same time, he shows us grace. We are welcome at His table, because the act of Jesus dying for us has removed that punishment. We fear God, because He is fearsome, but through that fear, love can take place.

Think about that passage in Revelation. We may approach this wonderful, almighty God with eyes like fire, and a voice that roars like the sea. We can stand before Him, confident that we have been

made right with Him. With no fear of punishment, because He took our own punishment for us.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. If we understand His power enough to fear Him, then we should be able to see how the sacrifice of the cross brings us life. For me, the fear of God is summed up in the words of Mr Beaver: He is “not safe, but He’s good.”

In many passages we’ve looked at today, there are the words “fear not.” Through learning to fear God, we are set free from fear of other things:

If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Romans 8:31-32

Just like the Israelites on Mount Sinai, if we fear the Lord, if we believe that He is all powerful, then who can be against us? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The same power that we are fearful of is the power that lets us be with Him, and put our trust in Him.

To end with another verse from a Psalm:

“The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him”

Psalms 25:14