

Recapturing a Proper Understanding of the Fear

by John Franklin

The fear of God is a rational, thought-out, calculated conclusion based on facts about God regarding accountability to Him for sin, and it is critical to our churches and the nation.

Scripture: Exodus 20:18

Topics: "Fear Of God", "Holiness Of God"

Description

John Franklin emphasizes the importance of understanding and embracing the fear of God, highlighting the two types of fear mentioned in the Bible - a physical reaction to God's presence and a rational understanding of accountability to Him for sin. He challenges the common misconception that the fear of God is merely awe and reverence without an element of fear, stressing the need to acknowledge God's holiness and our accountability to Him. Franklin warns against living with a one-sided view of God's love and grace, neglecting His holiness, and emphasizes the consequences of willful sin without fearing God's accountability.

Transcript

Traveling at 30,000 feet from Dallas to Nashville, I stared at a blank computer screen in the grip of writer's block for at least thirty minutes. Not that I lacked anything to write, but rather I so passionately wanted to communicate with you that I labored to form the words. This passion arises from a deep conviction that nothing less than our national destiny hangs in the balance.

This third article builds upon the first two. In article one I contended that God tested and revealed the heart of our nation through the trial of our President, and that the purpose of that testing was to wake us up to see how far we have drifted from Him. In article two I argued that the root problem of the nation's moral collapse was the loss of fearing God, and that this is the greatest need facing Christians and the culture. In this article I propose to explain what the fear of God means and why we have lost it.

So, what exactly does the fear of God mean? Why do I contend that the fear of God is the most important issue facing the nation and Christians today? Is it an abstract concept or does it radically impact the whole future of our America?

I will be the first to admit that it commands no bearing on our future if the fear of God is defined according to a popular understanding among many Christians in our churches today. My primary job assignment is to lead prayer conferences across the nation and often I informally poll attendees to ask them what their opinion is on the subject. Usually a large number of participants will give an answer that goes something like this, "Well, the fear of God means that you have an awe or reverence, a sense of wonder and deep respect that overcomes you at the greatness of who His is, but you're certainly not supposed to be afraid of God."

Wherever people got that idea, I submit to you that they did not get it from the Bible.

I studied every time the word "fear" appeared in the Bible and discovered that at least two types of fearing God exist. The first type of fear produces a physical, bodily sensation of quaking, trembling or a death-like state when God manifests His presence. John fell at his feet as though dead. (Rev 1:17) Daniel couldn't even speak because no strength or breath remained in him (Dan 10:18). When the disciples heard the voice on the Mount of Transfiguration they fell on their faces greatly afraid (Mt. 17:6). When God came to make a covenant with Abraham, horror and great darkness fell upon him (Gen. 15:12). Fear typically accompanies appearances by angels, so it should be no surprise that God, who is infinitely greater than the angels, should produce the same effect. The manifestation of His glory always creates such an overwhelming experience of terror and dread that no mere human ever remained standing in Scripture. However, when the Bible speaks of the fear of God it usually refers to the second kind.

The second type of fear, oddly enough, is the opposite of the first. Whereas the first is a bodily, physical emotion reacting to the manifest presence of God, the second is a rational, thought out, calculated conclusion based on facts about God regarding accountability to Him for sin. Let me illustrate with a verse in the Bible where both appear simultaneously. In Exodus 20:18-20 we find that God has come down on Mt. Sinai; the mountain was smoking, while thunder and lightning engulfed the top of it. In verse 19 the people begged Moses to talk with God and not them "lest we die." Moses makes a very interesting statement in verse 20, "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin." Did you notice the irony? Moses said in effect, "Don't be afraid, because God has come to make you afraid!" How can this paradox be? Precisely because the first commandment not to fear addresses the emotional fear that they have at the presence of God. In the second case, however, Moses notes that the whole reason that God has manifested Himself in such a terrible display of power is so that they might understand His greatness, be aware of their accountability to Him, and learn not to sin.

As I stated earlier, many Christians today mistakenly try to explain away the fear of God with such statements as, "Well, the fear of God means that you have an awe or reverence, a sense of wonder and deep respect that overcomes you at the greatness of who His is, but you're certainly not supposed to be afraid of God." Probably this misunderstanding arises from two sources, the first being the definition of awe and reverence. Our modern culture has changed the original meaning of awe and we now use it in the sense of wonder or amazement. Webster, however, defines awe as "fear mixed with dread, veneration, reverence, or wonder: as in a profound and reverent fear inspired by deity" (*italics mine*). Reverence is not a respect based on admiration, but a "profound respect mingled with love and awe [*italics mine*](as for a holy or exalted being or place or thing)". In both cases fear is an integral part of the definition, and it means exactly what it says.

The second misunderstanding derives from a failure to proclaim the whole counsel of God. I believe that we have emphasized the love, mercy, forgiveness, and grace of God to the exclusion of His holiness, our

accountability to Him, and the fear due His name. I don't disagree with anything taught in our churches about the tender side of God, but we've said it so long without the other that many people today live with a cream puff concept of God. They can sin when they want to, confess it, and God is obligated to not only forgive, but let them suffer no consequences. How do we know this is true? By statistical data.

As I cited in the previous articles, the Barna surveys reveal no significant statistical difference in the lifestyles of Christians in the church with those of pagans. In other words, the divorce rate, gambling, horoscope reading, getting even, discounting standards of absolute truth, and other lifestyle habits show no significant difference. In fact the divorce rate among Christians is higher! How can this be except grace has become a license to sin? Teaching only one side of the relationship with God while ignoring His holiness is like teaching someone how to drive a car by showing them where the pedal is, but not the brake. It's not that there's anything false in our teaching about God's grace, but it's incomplete without an emphasis on accountability. It requires both pedals to drive the car, just as it requires an understanding of both God's love and holiness for a healthy relationship with Him.

Please don't misunderstand what I am saying. If you are a Christian, I'm not calling into question what happens regarding salvation. But if you knowingly live a lifestyle that is clearly sin, and you don't learn to fear God and the accountability that comes from being called by His name, then the consequences for you will be far worse than whatever temporary enjoyment that sin brings. When David committed adultery and murder against Uriah, God still forgave him, but because of his sin three of his sons died, God gave his concubines to his own son to sleep with in broad daylight in front of the whole nation, the sword never left his house, and thousands of his subjects died in the conflict that ensued. He did not fear God, and the accountability required proved to be dreadful.

Please note also that I am making a distinction between willful, deliberate, calculated sin versus that done in ignorance. God deals differently with those whose heart is toward Him, but if after He warns and grants time for repentance, yet a man refuses to repent, then "do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." (Gal 6:7) No man wants to find out what will happen. If we really believed this instead of having the pushover view of God, then Christians would depart or resist sin.

So, why is this truth so critical to our churches and the nation? Since we are departing from sin no more than the culture, then there must be an accountability. In the next article I propose to Biblically look at what the accountability looks like (because we are already under it) and apply it to our nation and churches. For now, suffice it to say that the fear of God most often relates to our accountability to Him instead of our admiration of Him.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-franklin/recapturing-a-proper-understanding-of-the-fea/>

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