

Union

*The Surprising Good News
of the Fear of the Lord*

*REJOICE
&
TREMBLE*

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Do Not Be Afraid!

BOO!

It's one of the first words we enjoy. As children, we loved to leap out on our friends and shout it. But at the same time, we were scared of the dark and the monsters under the bed. We were both fascinated *and* repelled by our fears. And not much changes when we grow up: adults love scary movies and thrills that bring us face-to-face with our worst fears. But we also brood and agonize over all the dark and dreadful things that could happen to us: how we could lose our lives, health, or loved ones; how we might fail or be rejected. Fear is probably the strongest human emotion. But it is one that baffles us.

To Fear or Not to Fear?

When we come to the Bible, the picture seems equally confusing: is fear a good thing or bad? Is fear something to embrace or to flee? Many times Scripture clearly views fear as a bad thing from which Christ has come to rescue us. The apostle John writes: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love"

(1 John 4:18). Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, prophesied that Jesus's salvation would mean

that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him *without fear*,
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
(Luke 1:74–75)

The author of Hebrews agrees, arguing that Christ came specifically to “deliver all those who *through fear* of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Heb. 2:15). Indeed, the most frequent command in Scripture is “Do not be afraid!”

Yet, again and again in Scripture we are called to fear. Perhaps even more strangely, we are called to fear *God*. The verse that quickly comes to mind is Proverbs 9:10:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

But while that is the best known, it is far from alone. At the start of the book of Proverbs we read,

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction. (1:7)

David prays,

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

Isaiah tells us that “the fear of the LORD is Zion's treasure” (Isa. 33:6). Job's faithfulness is summed up when he is described as “a blameless and upright man, who fears God” (Job 1:8). And this is not merely

an Old Testament state of affairs that the New Testament rises above. In the Magnificat, Mary says that

[the Lord's] mercy is for those who fear him from
generation to generation. (Luke 1:50)

Jesus describes the unrighteous judge as one “who neither feared God nor respected man” (Luke 18:2). Paul writes, “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1); and again, “Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord” (Col. 3:22). Clearly, the New Testament agrees with the “Preacher” when he concludes Ecclesiastes: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccles. 12:13).

In fact, the fear of God is so important a theme in Scripture that Professor John Murray wrote simply, “The fear of God is the soul of godliness.”¹ The seventeenth-century Puritan John Owen likewise argued that in Scripture, “the fear of the LORD” means “the whole worship of God, moral and instituted, all the obedience which we owe unto him.”² And Martin Luther taught in his Small Catechism that the fulfillment of the law means “we are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.”³ Walking his people through the Ten Commandments, Luther wrote that a right understanding of each meant knowing “we are to fear and love God.”

1 John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (London: Tyndale, 1957), 229.

2 John Owen, *Temptation and Sin*, vol. 6 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 382.

3 Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism, 1529: The Annotated Luther Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 217.

All of which can leave us rather confused. On the one hand, we are told that Christ frees us from fear; on the other, we are told we ought to fear—and fear God, no less. It can leave us discouraged and wishing that “the fear of God” were not so prominent an idea in Scripture. We have quite enough fears without adding more, thank you very much. And fearing God just feels so negative, it doesn’t seem to square with the God of love and grace we meet in the gospel. Why would any God worth loving *want* to be feared?

It is all made worse by the impression that *fear* and *love* are two different languages preferred by two different Christian camps—perhaps two different theologies. The one camp speaks of love and grace and never of fearing God. And the other camp seems angered by this and emphasizes how afraid of God we should be. The fear of God is like cold water on the Christian’s love for God. We get the impression that the fear of God must be the gloomy theological equivalent of eating your greens: something the theological health nuts binge on while everyone else enjoys tastier fare.

My aim now is to cut through this discouraging confusion. I want you to rejoice in this strange paradox that the gospel both frees us from fear and gives us fear. It frees us from our crippling fears, giving us instead a most delightful, happy, and wonderful fear. And I want to clear up that often off-putting phrase “the fear of God,” to show through the Bible that for Christians it really does *not* mean being afraid of God.

Indeed, Scripture will have many hefty surprises in store for us as it describes the fear of God that is the beginning of wisdom. It is not what we would expect. Take just one example for now. In Isaiah 11:1–3 we are given a beautiful description of the Messiah, filled with the Spirit:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

And 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 the fear of the LORD.
And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

Those last two statements should make us question what this fear of the Lord is. Here we see that the fear of the Lord is not something the Messiah wishes to be without. Even he, in his sinless holiness and perfection, has the fear of the Lord—but he is not reluctant about it. It is not that he loves God and has joy in God but finds (unfortunately) that to fulfill all righteousness he also must fear God. Quite the opposite: the Spirit who rests on him is the Spirit of the fear of the Lord, and his *delight* is in the fear of the Lord. It forces us to ask, what is this fear, that it can be Christ's very delight? It cannot be a negative, gloomy duty.

Today's Culture of Fear

But before we dive into the good news the Bible has about our fears and the fear of God, it is worth noticing how anxious our culture has become. Seeing where our society now is can help us understand why we have a problem with fear—and why the fear of God is just the tonic we need.

These days, it seems, everyone is talking about a culture of fear. From Twitter to television, we fret about global terrorism, extreme weather, pandemics, and political turmoil. In political campaigns and elections, we routinely see fear rhetoric used by politicians who recognize that fear drives voting patterns. And in our digitalized world, the speed at which information and news are disseminated means that we are flooded with more causes of worry than ever. Fears

that once we would never have shared cross the world in seconds and are globally pooled.

Our private, daily routines are filled with still more sources of anxiety. Take our diet, for example. If you choose the full-fat version on the menu, you're heading for a heart attack. Yet we're regularly confronted with the latest discovery that the low-calorie alternative is actually carcinogenic or harmful in some other way. And so a low-grade fear starts with breakfast. Or think of the paranoia surrounding parenting today. The valid but usually overblown fear of the kidnapper lurking online or outside every school has helped fuel the rise of helicopter parenting and children more and more fenced in to keep them safe. Small surprise, then, that universities are now expected to provide previously unheard-of "safe spaces" to protect or quarantine students. Children have grown up so protected that they are not expected to be able to cope with opposing viewpoints or criticism. It is just one indicator that they are considered more fragile than students were a generation ago.

However, it is wrong to single out the pejoratively named Generation Snowflake: as a whole, we are an increasingly anxious and uncertain culture. Anyone in management knows about the staggering proliferation of bureaucratic red tape around health and safety. Yet it has not made us feel safer. If anything, we triple-check our locks even more obsessively. The certain safety we long for evades us, leaving us feeling vulnerable, like victims at the slim mercy of everyone and everything else.

And therein is an extraordinary paradox, for we live more safely than ever before. From seatbelts and airbags in our cars to the removal of lead paint and asbestos from our homes, our safety is guarded more than our shorter-lived ancestors could have imagined. We have antibiotics to protect us from infections that in other centuries would

have been all too easily fatal. But rather than rejoicing, we worry we're becoming immune and so heading into a post-antibiotic health apocalypse. Though we are more prosperous and secure, though we have more safety than almost any other society in history, safety has become the holy grail of our culture. And like *the* Holy Grail, it is something we can never quite reach. Protected like never before, we are skittish and panicky like never before.

How can this be? When we are so cushioned as a society, why is the culture of fear so strong today? Professor Frank Furedi writes: "Why Americans fear more when they have far less to fear than in other moments in the past is a question that puzzles numerous scholars. One argument used to explain this 'paradox of a safe society' is that prosperity encourages people to become more risk and loss averse."⁴

There may be something to this. We certainly are free to want more, have the chance to own more, and often feel the right to enjoy more. And the more you want something, the more you fear its loss. When your culture is hedonistic, your religion therapeutic, and your goal a feeling of personal well-being, fear will be the ever-present headache. For all that, though, Furedi argues that the "paradox of a safe society" actually has deeper roots. It is, he maintains, *moral confusion in society* that has led to an inability to deal with fear, a rise in anxiety, and so an increase in the number of protective fences erected around us.

Furedi's argument is especially interesting given that he is an ardent humanist, not a Christian. It is insightful and surely right of him to look for deep roots to our culture of anxiety. I suggest, though, that he has not dug deep enough. Furedi's argument is that moral confusion

⁴ Frank Furedi, *How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 22.

has left our society anxious. However, moral confusion itself is a consequence of a *prior* loss: the fear of God. It is God who provides the logic and matrix of morality: when he is no longer feared, moral confusion must follow. In other words, moral confusion is not the root of our anxiety: our moral confusion today and our general state of heightened anxiety are *both* the fallout of a cultural loss of God as the proper object of human fear.⁵ That fear of God (as I hope to show) was a happy and healthy fear that shaped and controlled our other fears, thus reining in anxiety.

With society having lost God as the proper object of healthy fear, our culture is necessarily becoming ever more neurotic, ever more anxious about the unknown—indeed, ever more anxious about anything and everything. Without a kind and fatherly God’s providential care, we are left utterly uncertain about the shifting sands of both morality and reality. In ousting God from our culture, other concerns—from personal health to the health of the planet—have assumed a divine ultimacy in our minds. Good things have become cruel and pitiless idols. And thus we feel helplessly fragile. No longer anchored, society fills with free-floating anxieties. (Where fear is a response to something specific, anxiety is more of a general condition, like something in the atmosphere. Anxiety can therefore latch on to anything and morph effortlessly in a moment: one minute we are concerned about knife crime, the next about climate change.)

5 I do not mean to imply that Western “Christian” culture was once necessarily filled with more regenerate believers who had a right fear of God. Rather, a broader cultural acknowledgment—even a sort of fear—of God provided the framework for a more commonly assumed respect for moral order. Moreover, the church’s influence on the culture was greater, and a right, believing fear of God provided the heart and soul of a wider appreciation that we live in this world under the just and holy eye of God.

The Fearful Legacy of Atheism

The suggestion that our loss of the fear of God is the root cause of our culture's anxiety is a real blow to atheism. For atheism promised exactly the opposite. Atheism sold the idea that if you liberate people from belief in God, that will liberate them from fear. This is how Bertrand Russell argued the case in 1927 in his famous address *Why I Am Not a Christian*:

Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown, and partly, as I have said, the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing—fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion has gone hand-in-hand. It is because fear is at the basis of those two things. In this world we can now begin a little to understand things, and a little to master them by help of science, which has forced its way step by step against the Christian religion, against the Churches, and against the opposition of all the old precepts. Science can help us to get over this craven fear in which mankind has lived for so many generations. Science can teach us, and I think our own hearts can teach us, no longer to look round for imaginary supports, no longer to invent allies in the sky, but rather to look to our own efforts here below to make this world a fit place to live in, instead of the sort of place that the churches in all these centuries have made it.⁶

6 Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957), 22.

While Russell tragically misunderstands what it means for the Christian to fear God, one struggles not to laugh at how wildly inaccurate his prophecy has turned out to be. For, nearly a century after he said those words, it should be clear to even the most vision-impaired mole that throwing off the fear of God has not made our society happier and less fretful. Quite the opposite—a point acknowledged by the staunchly atheistic professor Frank Furedi, who has become perhaps the global expert on our modern culture of fear.

Of course, it was not only Bertrand Russell who argued that more self-dependence and less fear of God would help us. The whole premise of the Enlightenment was that the advance of our knowledge would dispel our problems and our superstitious fears. This confidence in human reason was classically depicted in the frontispiece to Christian Wolff's marvelously ambitious *Reasonable Thoughts about God, the World, the Human Soul, and All Things in General* (1720). The engraving shows the happy sun of knowledge lighting up the gloomy old world of faith, driving away the shadows and the darkness of fear and superstition. A cheery thought indeed for the eighteenth century; but, again, quite the opposite has happened. Today, while we all (sort of) love our smartphones and our GPSs, we acknowledge that the advance of knowledge is a mixed blessing. For it is all too apparent now that new technologies have consequences we cannot foresee. When, for example, you first bought a smartphone, you had no idea of its toll on your social behavior or your sleep patterns. When first you used social media, you saw some potential bonuses but had no concept of how it would feed your fear of missing out. More knowledge does not necessarily mean less fear; it often means more.

Perhaps the greatest irony, though, is that the free-floating anxiety that fills our “enlightened” and godless society is really nothing more

than the same primitive superstition we thought knowledge would eradicate. In 1866 Charles Kingsley delivered a lecture at the Royal Institution in London entitled “Superstition.”⁷ In that lecture he defined superstition as that fear of the unknown which is not guided by reason. Which is precisely what we see all around us. It is not obvious to us that our fears are actually superstitious, for, said Kingsley, we always endeavor to make our superstitions look reasonable. To prove his point, Kingsley gave the example of the fifteenth-century textbook on witchcraft the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Seeking to make a science out of witch-finding, this text fueled a fear-filled superstitious urge to find witches by giving that urge an apparently scientific basis. According to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, you could not question the reality of witches in our midst—it was a reasonable and scientifically verifiable concern. But superstition it was, Kingsley argued. And despite great strides in knowledge, such unquestioned, fear-inducing superstition remained in his day. Mere advance in knowledge and technology does not eliminate fear.

So, what does our culture do with all its anxiety? Given its essentially secular self-identity, our society will not turn to God. The only possible solution, then, must be for us to sort it out ourselves. Thus Western, post-Enlightenment society has medicalized fear. Fear has become an elusive disease to be medicated. (I do not mean to imply here that use of drugs to curb anxiety is wrong—only that they are a palliative, at times an important one, and not an ultimate solution.)⁸ Yet that attempt to eradicate fear as we would eradicate

7 Charles Kingsley, “Superstition: A Lecture Delivered at the Royal Institution, April 24, 1866,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 73 (January–June 1866): 705–16.

8 For a helpful and perceptive introduction to this issue, see Michael R. Emler, “Prozac and the Promises of God: The Christian Use of Psychoactive Medication,” *desiringGod* (website), August 22, 2019, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/prozac-and-the-promises-of-god>.

a disease has effectively made comfort (complete absence of fear) a health category—or even a moral category. Where discomfort was once considered quite normal (and quite proper for certain situations), it is now deemed an essentially unhealthy thing. It means, for example, that a university student can say, “I am uncomfortable with your views,” and consider that a legitimate argument for shutting down further discussion. For it is not acceptable to make someone uncomfortable.

It means that in a culture awash with fear and anxiety, fear is increasingly seen as a *wholly* negative thing in society. And Christians have been swept along in that greater tide of opinion, adopting society’s negative assessment of all fear. Small wonder, then, that we shy away from talking about the fear of God, despite its prominence in Scripture and in Christian thought historically. It is completely understandable, but it is tragic: the loss of the fear of God is what ushered in our modern age of anxiety, but the fear of God is the very antidote to our fretfulness.

Speaking a Better Word

In contrast to how things are today, Christians in past generations who embraced the fear of God managed to speak of fear with an enviable combination of tenderness, optimism, and roundedness. An example is John Flavel, one of the last generation of Puritans. In his classic work “A Practical Treatise on Fear,” he shows a touching sensitivity to the mental anguish our fears can cause:

Among all the creatures God hath made (devils only excepted) man is the most apt and able to be his own tormentor; and of all the scourges with which he lasheth and afflicteth both his mind and body, none is found so cruel and intolerable as his own fears.

The worse the times are like to be, the more need the mind hath of succour and encouragement, to confirm and fortify it for hard encounters; but from the worst prospect, fear inflicts the deepest and most dangerous wounds upon the mind of man, cutting the very nerves of its passive fortitude and bearing ability.⁹

Yet rather than being sent by this prospect into a downward spiral of anxiety (like our culture), Flavel is upbeat and helpful. For he has a clear and happy answer. At the root of most of our fears, he argues, is our unbelief:

If men would but dig to the root of their fears, they would certainly find unbelief there, Matth. viii. 26. Why are ye afraid, O ye of little faith! The less faith, still the more fear: Fear is generated by unbelief, and unbelief strengthened by fear; . . . and therefore all the skill in the world can never cure us of the disease of fear, till God first cure us of our unbelief; Christ therefore took the right method to rid his disciples of their fear, by rebuking their unbelief.¹⁰

Anxiety grows best in the soil of unbelief. It withers in contact with faith. And faith is fertilized by the fear of God, as Flavel demonstrates in the rest of his treatise.

A Rose by Any Other Name Would Smell as Sweet

Flavel saw what we struggle to see today, that not all fear is the same, or bad, or unhealthy, or unpleasant. He argued that we must distinguish between different sorts of fear, between wrong fear and right

⁹ John Flavel, "A Practical Treatise on Fear," in *The Whole Works of John Flavel*, vol. 3 (London: W. Baynes and Son, 1820), 239.

¹⁰ Flavel, "A Practical Treatise on Fear," 264.

fear.¹¹ That is what we will do now as we look at how Scripture details some quite different types of fear—some negative, some positive. For then we can rejoice in the fact that the fear of God commended in Scripture is not to be dismissed for how it sounds like fears that torment us. Then we can appreciate how it is a fear that causes delight to Christ and delight to his people. It is the one positive, wonderful fear that deals with our anxieties.

¹¹ Flavel, “A Practical Treatise on Fear,” 245.



“Modern people often view the fear of God with disdainful suspicion, but Reeves shows us that godly fear is really nothing other than love for God as God.”

JOEL R. BEEKE

President and Professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; author, *Reformed Preaching*

“Reeves guides us into a fresh understanding of the fear of the Lord. Join him on the journey. You will soon discover why ‘the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him’ (Ps. 147:11).”

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