

“From Fear to Fear”
Exodus 20:18–23
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Exodus 20:18–23 says [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.” [21] The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.*

[22] *And the LORD said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. [23] You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold.*

This is God’s Word.

Years ago we took a group of high school students on a trip to England. It was the last Sunday we were there and we were in a little Methodist church where we had been ministering while we were there. The ministry was run by Baptist missionaries and a Presbyterian was preaching. So there was a lot of interesting dynamics and I was going through phrase by phrase, John 3:16 which says [16] *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

I had gotten through ‘whoever believes in Him’ and had explained what it meant to believe in Christ, to put our trust and faith in Him. I talked about the fact that people will perish if they don’t do that. As I’m going through this one of the moms who had been bringing her child to one of the Bible clubs we were having that week, interrupted me while I was preaching. This can be done in a small church but not nearly as easily in a big one. This mom said “Benny, you’re saying we have to believe in Jesus Christ to get to heaven and the rest will perish for all eternity.” I said ‘Alexa, that’s it, you got it.’ She started yelling back ‘No! That’s not it, I don’t believe that’ and pointing her finger at my face she shouted ‘This man is preaching fear! Let’s get out of here!’ She started collecting all of her kids.

She had started a commotion during the sermon and the little missionary ladies were saying “Alexa, please don’t leave, think about the children, please don’t leave!” I’m just shook and I said ‘Yes, please don’t leave.’ She went to the back, stopped, I finished my sermon quickly and I don’t have any idea what I said. After I finished I went back to talk to her and she was still angry at me, saying ‘You’re preaching fear!’ Right outside the church was this small foyer and right outside the front door was the sidewalk near a dangerous intersection. Her daughter Sarah kept going out to the foyer and as Alexa was made at me she was also yelling at her daughter. It was very distracting.

Finally, I said as I was frustrated, ‘Alexa why are you preaching fear to your daughter? Why do you keep yelling at her and saying that to her?’ She said ‘I don’t want anything to happen to her. I don’t want her to go out there. It’s dangerous.’ I said ‘But why are you telling her it’s dangerous?’ She said ‘Because I love her.’ I said ‘That’s it Alexa. You know that there’s a dangerous road out there and I know that there’s a dangerous broad road that leads to destruction which many will find but then there’s just a small road that leads to eternal life and few are those who find it. So maybe I’m preaching fear but it’s out of the amazing love of God.’

She calmed down and we had a great conversation. She didn't pray to receive Christ but she began to understand what the love of God meant for the believer.

I think of that story often especially as I think of the fear of God. Not too long ago Pastor Reeder was preaching through Habakkuk and said 'when was the last time you heard a sermon on the fear of God?' That was my confirmation about this study today, on the fear of God. So in this study I want to think about the fear of God, keeping in mind the love of God as we think about it as we realize that there is no contradiction whatsoever between the two. Psalm 33:18 says [18] *Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love.* Here the fear of God and the love of God are brought together.

I am thankful here at this church that we hear sermons on the fear of God, in one sense, almost every week, because one of the key elements to Godly fear is submission to God's Word and where we understand God's greatness. Week after week God's Word is faithfully preached by our senior pastor with an exalted view of God, His greatness, His mercy, His love and the Scriptures present to us the fear of God as a guiding principle for the life of a believer throughout, from Genesis to Revelation. God wants us to develop this principle in our life which is critical.

The first way we begin to develop a fear of God is to think correctly about Him. In 1961, A.W. Tozer wrote a book on the attributes of God titled The Knowledge of the Holy. The first chapter of the book was titled 'Why We Must Think Rightly About God.' He said that how we think about God is the most important thing about us. He goes on to say it's critical that our ideas and thoughts about God are as close to possible correspond with who God really is. In his book he also says the essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts totally unworthy of God. The fear of God and Godly fear frees us from this error. We need to recover the doctrine of the fear of God and the proper place it should have in our lives as Christians.

In Exodus 20:18 we see the reaction of the people to the terrifying majesty of God. [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.* This event began in Exodus 19 right before Moses was getting ready to go up on the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, the Law of God. To get a better feel for what has happened here you would really need to read through Deuteronomy.

Their traumatic encounter with God's holy transcendence and eminence shakes the very foundation of the earth. Transcendence means God's otherness. He is not like anything at all in creation. He is completely separate from and sovereign over His creation. God through the Prophet Isaiah says in Isaiah 46:5, [5] *"To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike?"* That shows God's transcendence, His otherness but His eminence is just simply that He's close to us. Moses in recounting what is going on here in Exodus later in Deuteronomy 4:7 says, [7] *For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?* God is close to us and loves us. We need to work hard to keep both of those attributes and all the attributes of God together otherwise we will lose a correct understanding of who God is, if we don't.

In the hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy* the first verse says;
Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;
Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

We need to remember the Trinity because when we speak of the terrifying and traumatic display of God's holy presence, we need to also keep in mind that this includes a presence of the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity. The pre-incarnate Christ was there on Mount Sinai. The majesty of the Trinity is in its mystery. One theologian said years ago that if you try to explain the Trinity you will lose your mind, but if you deny the Trinity you will lose your soul. Sometimes when we are delving into the mystery of the Godhead, His power, His glory, His hiddenness, His incomprehensibility and sometimes the best proper response we can have when we don't understand is simply to humble ourselves, raise our hands, bow our heads and to say 'God, You are God' and then keep silent.

The third verse to the hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy* sums up what happens in Exodus 20:18 and leads us into what is going to happen in verse 19 and it says;

*Holy, holy, holy! Tho' the darkness hide Thee,
Tho' the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see;
Only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee,
Perfect in power, in love, and purity.*

When men and women lose a high view of who God is and the proper fear of God then they want nothing to do with Him. That is the request we see in Exodus 20:19 which says [19] and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." This is the request of the people for a Mediator. When the people of Israel looked on Mount Sinai, while in the presence of God and heard His thunderous voice, they were overwhelmed with the condemning power of the Law, pointed at them as rebellious sinners. They realized they were in deep trouble.

One of the first things people do when they get in trouble with the law is hire a lawyer but a lawyer couldn't help the people in this case. There was no arguing their case before an all knowing, perfect, holy and just God. No, they desperately needed a mediator, substitute, someone to stand in their place so they looked to Moses. The Law shows us our sinfulness in the midst of God's holiness and it condemns us to death. I wonder how Moses was going to go tell God what the people said to him when they said 'do not let God speak to us.'

Most people want the Lord to speak to them directly, even though we often don't take the time to listen to Him daily through His holy Word. Most of the misery in our life comes from not listening to and obeying the Word of God which is how He speaks to us today. Hearing and heeding the Word is what all the children of Israel should be about and that actually gives us an advantage over the Israelites. Even though they were eye witnesses and heard God's thunderous voice themselves, we have the Holy Spirit in us and He enables us to hear and understand the holy precious, living Word so that we might grow in respect to our salvation.

Moses then gives the rationale for God's terrifying demonstration in Exodus 20:20 says [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." In this verse we have a fear that is condemned and a fear that is commended which is where I got the title of this study, From Fear to Fear. We want to replace one type of fear with another. We want to replace the fear of man with the fear of God. In Luke 12 we see this exchange with the two types of fear when Jesus is speaking.

Luke 12:4-7 says [4] (Jesus says) "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. [5] But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! [6] Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. [7] Why,

even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.

What Jesus is saying here is ‘I love you. I care for you.’ The Apostle John says in I John 4:18, *[18] 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.* John is saying that once you become a believer the fear of punishment is gone. We will no longer have to fear every again that we’ll be punished as God’s children but the fear of God still remains. We trade one fear for the other.

The fear of man has a powerfully negative effect on us as believers so much so that as much as we fear those who kill the body, I’m afraid we may fear those who mock the body even more. I mean those who mock us as Christians. As the world, media, relatives and friends mock us as Christians, we cower in silence. We are afraid to own Jesus as King and Lord of our lives and it’s a fear of what someone may say about us.

Godly fear gives us confidence in sharing with the lost. Paul says in II Corinthians 5:11, *[11] Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience.* We definitely need God to develop the fear of Him in our lives so that He can develop an even greater lifestyle of evangelism and discipleship.

Proverbs 29:25 says *[25] The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.* The fear of man always moves us in the wrong direction. It moves us away from faith and trust in God to have faith and trust in ourselves. The fear of man moves us to resist faith. It paralyzes us and causes us to operate in the flesh instead of in the Spirit. In many ways, many fears are devastating on people as they deal with them. Pastor Reeder said the fear of man is a sinful substitute by Satan for the fear of God.

A common fear that we are face is the fear of failure. Moses told the people not to fear and then he tells them that God has come to test them. God’s purpose in this terrifying demonstration is that the fear of Him would be before them. Therefore it was a test of obedience. Now our obedience is never a means for earning any merit or blessings before God and we certainly don’t obey God perfectly. That’s why we needed a perfect Savior, a perfect Mediator and One who perfectly fulfilled the law for us in Jesus but sometimes we get confused about this.

Our shorter catechism tells us that we break the Law daily in heart, speech and behavior so we continually flee to Christ for forgiveness but as we sometimes get confused about this with the Law in our life, we tend to repeat slogans without a lot of thought. So we say things like ‘Christianity is about a relationship and not about rules’ as if the rules and commands of God are a bad thing for us. The rules of God are only bad when we try to be saved by them or we misuse the Law as it says in the Scripture. Used correctly, even though the Law cannot save us, it does guide us and it tells us what pleases God.

All relationships have rules. Think about the rules of marriage. My oldest daughter Lauren gets married in two weeks. Imagine she and her fiancé coming in and declaring that their marriage is going to be based on a relationship and not on rules. I would scratch my head and think ‘that’s kind of strange because you will actually stand before God and witnesses and you will make promises, you are going to vow to keep the rules of marriage. You are going to promise that you will love, cherish, honor, submit, be kind, patient, forgiving, you will not commit adultery or lie and many more.’ You will actually see that the constraint of those rules are actually the very things that will give you the maximum amount of freedom in your marriage

for the rule of marriage are designed to promote happiness and the holiness of marriage. It's the breaking of those rules that lead to unhappiness and misery in marriage.

Likewise, the rules with our relationship with God are designed to promote our happiness, to prevent our misery and to preserve our holiness. It is the breaking of God's rules and Laws that lead us to misery, not keeping them. Sin is the ultimate killer of all joy and happiness, not obedience. It's true that a relationship with Christ is about love but it's a love that delights in keeping God's Law. He says, "If you love Me, you keep My commandments" (John 14:15). I John 5:3 says [3] *For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.* So it's a growth in grace of understanding the beauty of God's law for us. So you have the fear of God, the love of God and joyful obedience. All of these are fruits of God's powerful and amazing grace in our lives.

What is the definition of the fear of God? The Scripture does more describing of the fear of God than defining it but I'm going to attempt at defining it. The fear of God is a holy reverence, an awe inspiring love for God coupled with Godly wisdom and joyful obedience with a holy dread of ever sinning against God. Proverbs says were to live in that kind of fear always. So how do we live in it always? We live in that fear with a conscious awareness that we are continually in the presence of God who is a consuming fire but He's a compassionate Father, a loving Savior and a holy Comforter.

Think for a moment about the numerous blessings that the Bible lays on us as we practice the fear of God. Here are few just from the book of Proverbs. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7). Proverbs 15:33 says [33] *The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor.* You cannot be proud and fear God at the same time. Humility is a part of the fear of God. The fear of the Lord is our strong confidence (Proverbs 14:26). It prolongs life and blessed is everyone (Proverbs 10:27).

Jerry Bridges in his book The Joy of Fearing God says "We will not grow in the fear of God unless we work at it." So I want to give you three practical steps at how you can work at developing the fear of God in your life. The first step is do a sustained study in your small group on the fear of God. If you aren't in one, get in one or get some people together to start this. Start with Exodus 19 and 20 with a good commentary, then move to Deuteronomy 1 through 10, then to Hebrews 12 and Luke 12. It is in the Word of God that we find the fear of God.

Step two, study the attributes of God. Here are two small books that are packed with the attributes of God are The Knowledge of the Holy by A.W. Tozer and The Attributes of God by A.W. Pink.

Thirdly, go through Jerry Bridges book The Joy of Fearing God which is what I wanted to title this study. Do this in a small group. It is an excellent exposition of the fear of God and it has a 13 week study guide in the back of it.

Exodus 20:20b says [20b] *that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.* The fear of God is a powerful tool against sin in our lives. Our pastor regularly reminds us that we can't make peace treaties with sin. We are not to manage sin. We are to be about killing sin. Proverbs 8:13a says [13a] *The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil.* Proverbs 16:6b says [6b] *By the fear of the LORD one turns away from evil.* The fear of God causes us to be sin haters and sin slayers. That's important for us as believers. Jerry Bridges in his book The Joy of Fearing God says "Anytime we sin with the thought lurking in the back of our mind that God will forgive us, at that moment we're not living in the fear of God." That is convicting to me.

The 16th century John Calvin has an extended section of the in the Institutes of the Christian Religion on the fear of God and he said two things that really stood out to me. He said

“Even though a Christian is forever free from condemnation and punishment because they are in Christ, Christians are actually more cautious when it comes to how they deal with sin. When we think about the type of Father that God is to us – He’s all loving, gracious, merciful – and even if there were not a hell, the thought of offending Him seems more dreadful than death.” That’s the fear of the Lord and how we deal with sin.

I want to point out the graphic phrase in Exodus 20:21b which says [21b] *Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was*. Moses represented the people and moved into the mystery of God’s holiness and justice and this is part of the reconciling work of a mediator. Remember Moses was just a type of Christ. In the book of Hebrews we see over and over again that Jesus was a superior Mediator. He implemented and instituted a New Covenant, a better covenant.

So He comes in and serves as the one true Mediator between God and man. I Timothy 2:5 says [5] *For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*. The reason we can come safely to God in the New Testament is not because God is somehow less angry at sin, He’s senile and winks at us when we commit sin. No, it’s because Jesus, the Mediator, of a better covenant entered into the deep darkness of His Father’s wrath for us. He saved us from the wrath to come.

A.W. Pink in his book The Attributes of God said “As Christians we need to meditate regularly on the wrath of God.” Why would a Christian meditate on the wrath of God? Pink gives us three reasons. One is that our hearts may be duly impressed with God’s utter detestation of sin for we’re prone to regard sin lightly to forget its hideousness and to make excuses for it. Secondly, he says it begets the fear of God in our hearts but the third reason is what I love the most. Thirdly, when we meditate on God's wrath it draws out our souls in fervent praise that we have been forever delivered from the wrath that is to come. Amen!

In Exodus 20:22–23 God repeats the same warning over and over again and that is our proneness to idolatry. An idol is anything we esteem, love, fear, serve, delight in or depend upon more than God and that’s why John says I John 5:21, [21] *Little children, keep yourselves from idols*. Keep yourselves from growing into idolatry. The writer of Hebrews pulls together what happened here in Exodus, these two things and shows us a contrast of what is happening.

Hebrews 12:18–29 says [18] *For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest [19] and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. [20] For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” [21] Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” [22] **But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, [23] and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, [24] and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.***

[25] *See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. [26] **At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” [27] This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. [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.

Jesus is a Mediator of a better way so He has given us the greatness of the Spiritual Kingdom of Christ and the Spiritual Mountain but He also makes it clear in this passage that it's the same God and He is just as fearful. He is the Judge of all. Back then He shook the earth but once more He will shake the heavens, in order that the things that cannot be shaken will remain. What can't be shaken? His Spiritual Kingdom and every one of us who are in it cannot be shaken. Do you understand that? If you are a child of God it would be impossible for God now to reject you as one of His adopted sons and daughters as it would be for Him to reject His only begotten Son Jesus Christ. That's how safe you are in the unshakeable Kingdom but He says our God is a consuming fire and we're to remember that God is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Moses in reflecting on all of this sums up what he has been saying here in Exodus in Deuteronomy 10:12–13 which says [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, [13] and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good.”* This is great summary that God wants to develop in our life, the fear of God based on His great love for us.

I'd like to close by looking at Psalm 2 but if you are not a Christian today, have never put your trust in Christ, one of the most horrific verses in awful state of men and women is found in Romans 3:18 and it says [18] *“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”* If that's you as an unbeliever think about what is going on in Psalm 2.

Psalm 2:1–3 says [1] *Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? [2] The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, [3] “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.”* This is sinful man shaking their fists at God and telling Him they want to kill His Anointed, Christ. We did do that but then it says how God will respond to all of this when men mock at Him, shake their fist at Him and deny Him.

Psalm 2:4–5, 9–12 says [4] *He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. [5] Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury.*

[9] *You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. [10] Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. [11] Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. [12] Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

If you're not a Christian today please know that in the cross of Christ the justice and wrath of God were totally satisfied in Him and God has offered full and free forgiveness and salvation forever and ever. Stop being an unbeliever and believe. Kiss the Son not in the way that Judas Iscariot did in betrayal and unbelief, but in humble submission to His authority lest He be angry and you receive His wrath. God's wrath is on you if you're not a Christian but it's on His Son for you if you believe. Kiss the Son in repentance and faith for He gives eternal life and eternal peace forever and ever and forever frees you from eternally perishing. Kiss the Son with adoration, take refuge in Him and be happy and blessed forever. Flee in fear to Jesus Christ alone and you will be forever safe in His arms and saved from the wrath that is to come. Jesus' amazing grace will transform you from an enemy to a friend because He is a friend for sinners.

God poured out His holy wrath on His only begotten Son that you could be adopted into His family, forever safe and secure through His unfailing love for you. Kiss the Son and live forever. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, if there is someone reading this today who doesn't know You, I pray that they would flee to Christ as Your love and grace is offered to them and say "Forgive me Jesus. Come into my life. Change me. Make me the person You want me to be. Bring me into Your forever family and love me. Help me to love You." Father, I pray for Your people today that You would develop in us a holy fear of God that flows out of Your incredible love for us that we might glorify and enjoy You forever for we pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

- I. The Reaction of the People to the Terrifying Majesty Of God (18)
- II. The Request of the People for a Mediator (19)
- III. The Rationale Moses Gives for God's Terrifying Demonstration (20)
- IV. The Reconciling Work of the Mediator (21-23)