

Psalm 130: Growing in the Fear of the Lord

OUTLINE

Defining fear
Growing in fear

INTRODUCTION

Today I would like to give you a message for the new year, a message I seek for myself. I want us all to grow in the fear of the Lord. Now it might seem odd to say that we need to grow in the fear of the Lord, in an age that is filled with anxiety and fear. The world fears global warming; economic collapse; terrorist attacks; ongoing war; pandemics; controlling governments; the increase of cancers; mental illnesses; crime; suicide; sexual immorality; stronger more addictive drugs, etc. We are afraid of so much already, why would we want to add to our trouble and be afraid of God as well? Or maybe you have the wrong teaching of Scofield who taught that the fear of God is part of OT piety not the NT. It is my goal to rescue the fear of God from being associated with other fears; and from any false notion of a religion of fear as if the God of the OT is a different God to the God of the NT. We see in the NT that when the church is healthy is walks in the fear of God, Acts 9:31, 'So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.' Please notice how the fear of God and the comfort of the Spirit are put side by side. In fact the fear of God is commanded in the NT, 1 Peter 1:17, 'And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.' 1 Peter 2:17, 'Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.' The fear of the Lord is not beneath the Christian in fact it is something that Jesus Himself delighted in. Isaiah 11:1-3 is a messianic prophecy, '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. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear.' Christ as the Son of God; Christ as a sinless human being delights in the fear of God; the beloved Son who has no terror of His Father loves the fear of God; and the Holy Spirit produces that fear in Him in His incarnation.

To help us come to grips with the biblical teaching on the fear of God we will be using Psalm 130 as our guide. It is the 6th of the 7 penitential psalms, these are the psalms written to confess or mourn sin, Psalms 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130, and 143. Luther was once asked which were the best psalms and he said the 4 Pauline psalms, psalm 130 among them. Many don't know this, but earlier that day before John Wesley had his famous encounter with God while reading Luther's commentary on Romans, he had attended St Paul's Cathedral and had sung Psalm 130 as part of his preparation to receive the gospel. God used this psalm in the life of John Owen as well. It was the psalm He used to turn John Owen's preaching ministry around, 'I myself preached Christ," he continued, "some years, when I had but very little, if any, experimental acquaintance with access to God through Christ; until the Lord was pleased to visit me with sore affliction, whereby I was brought to the mouth of the grave, and under which my soul was oppressed with horror and darkness; but God graciously relieved my

spirit by a powerful application of Psalm 130:4, But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared;' from whence I received special instruction, peace, and comfort, in drawing near to God through the Mediator, and preached thereupon immediately after my recovery."¹ The psalm itself divides into four parts, in v1-2 we see the Psalmist in despair crying out; in v3-4 he highlights the gracious nature of God and how God grace induces fear; in v5-6 we see him waiting in expectation upon a God who saves sinners; and in v7-8 we see him confident in God's big plan of salvation. We will be using this psalm to introduce us to the biblical idea of the fear of God. We have two parts, defining the fear of God; and growing in the fear of God.

Defining fear

V1-2, 'Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!' Have you ever felt overwhelmed with your sins, your circumstances, and you feel like your drowning? That is where our psalm begins, in the depths, a water metaphor for being well submerged. It is important to note that the psalmist is seeking forgiveness for his sins, and the depths that he is submerged under are related to his sins. We are not given the specifics but we can get a sense that the psalmist is suffering in some way related to his sins. He is at the lowest of the low, he is at the bottom of a pit that he has dug for himself. Now at this point you would expect anyone to think I am unworthy to call upon God; I am unworthy to expect an answer. And this is true you are, but God is gracious. We often find the saints of God submerged and yet despite their unworthiness crying out to God. I cannot help but think of Jonah who was literally drowning as a consequence of his sins. Jonah 2:2-3, "'I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.'" In v2 Jonah summarizes the events, I was in trouble, I cried out and I was heard. V3 emphasizes that God had tossed His disobedient prophet into the deeps. There is a graphic depiction of Jonah sinking to the bottom of the sea wrapped in sea weed, and just as it seems he is about to die he cries out to God and is heard, v7, 'When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.'

Is this you? Are you in deep waters; suffering from self-inflicted wounds due to turning to sin and from God. We have a pattern in scripture where unworthy sinners call on God and are heard.

It is in the next verses that we see why David and Jonah and many other saints have the audacity to cry out to God, v3-4, 'If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.' There is a deep and informed knowledge of God here. The working assumption is that God is holy, that God is just, that we are fatally flawed and sinful, and we cannot do a thing to deal with our own sins. We are worthy of condemnation yet God is a God who forgives. Here we have not just a notion of divinity, but a clear understanding of the God who has revealed Himself to His people. Ex. 34:4-7, 'So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first. And he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded

¹ <https://www.monergism.com/forgiveness-sin-practical-exposition-upon-psalm-130-ebook> accessed 12/14/2023

him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone. ⁵ The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. ⁶ The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." Our God is slow to anger, yet always ready to forgive. He is patient; He restores; a bruised reed He does not break; and a smoldering wick He does not snuff out.

From Him we receive forgiveness. What an immeasurable treasure. We are forgiven even though we deserve punishment. We are forgiven even though we are repeat offenders. We are forgiven freely, for the asking, even though we have nothing to pay. We are forgiven because He pays where we cannot. We are forgiven for every sin. We are forgiven permanently. We are forgiven instantly. We are forgiven and adopted. We are forgiven for our sins, and we are credited with a righteousness not our own. We are forgiven for our sins and we are renovated with a new heart fitting us for obedience. We are forgiven for our disobedience and rewarded for Christ's obedience. We are forgiven and beyond probation; and one day we will be forgiven and beyond sinning.

We can feel the great relief of the Psalmist and come to our point as we see what a proper response to this gracious forgiveness is, 'But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.' What a strange pairing. You would expect the word love not fear, what is going on here? This is not the only time we see such a connection. This brings us to consider what the bible means by fear of the Lord. The trouble with the word fear is that it can be used for something positive and negative. Negatively we associate fear with terror, with not feeling safe but threatened, abusive relationships, with punishment. Historically Christians have distinguished between two types of biblical fear, servile fear, the fear that a slave might have of a master's punishment; and filial fear which is the honor and reverence that a child would have towards a loving father. Some have referred to it as the fear of doubt, and the fear of faith. There is a fear that drives us from God; and a fear that drives us to Him. Thomas Boston distinguishes them this way: 'Slavish fear dreads nothing but hell and punishment. Filial fear dreads sin itself. . . . The one is mixed with hatred of God, the other with love to him—the one looks on him as a revenging judge, the other as a holy father, to whose holiness the heart is reconciled and the soul longs to be conformed.'²

Godly fear is our deep heart felt love for God. We can see this for example in Psalm 145:19-20 where through the device of Hebrew parallelism we see an equivalence between those who love God and those who fear Him, 'He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them. The Lord preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.' We see this again in Deuteronomy 6 where fearing God and keeping His law, and loving God and keeping His law are equated, v2-3, "'Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the rules—that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, ² that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your

² <https://www.crossway.org/articles/how-to-grow-in-the-fear-of-the-lord/>

life, and that your days may be long.’ V5-7, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.’

It has been noted how awkward it is that fervent love to God is described with the word fear. But we must insist that this is no mistake and is in fact a way for us to better understand what it is. Think about negative fear for a moment. Think about when the full reality of the judgement of God comes upon you for sin. This is what is described in a verse like Is. 33:14, ‘The sinners in Zion are afraid; trembling has seized the godless: “Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings?” It is appropriate to use the word fear as it has within its scope that internal emotional element, a whole souled response to divine truth. But that is not all there is also an outward visible manifestation of an emotion that is too big to keep all inside. In the Hebrew bible we see the exact same word used to describe our response not to God’s judgement but to His goodness as well, Jer. 33:9, ‘And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them. They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it.’ This is not completely out of the bounds of our experience. We know how fear and love can go together when we fear to hurt someone we love; or we fear to lose a loved one. The idea we have before us is this one: the goodness and grace of God towards us is so great that the best way to describe the overwhelming nature of our feelings is a very strong word—fear. The fear of God for the believer is not a fear marked by anxiety; by a dread of impending punishment; a traumatized cringing from punishment. As someone has put it, it is a response to God as glorious not hazardous.

The word ‘fear’ is not intended by the psalmist in psalm 130 to indicate a sense of dread just in case his sins will still get him in trouble, that God is his father not judge, or that there is any lack of certainty about God’s full and free forgiveness. No it is clear that for him it is almost a law of nature that any who experience the overwhelming grace of God in the forgiveness of sins will express themselves in an intensity of emotion, the word fear captures.

This is an important element of what I want to stress for us today. What we have lost in the no longer thinking of our devotion as a fear of the Lord is a loss of this emotional element. A word used to describe the visceral response of our hearts to ultimate truth; a word that expresses a response at the level of body, mind and emotion. A sense of uncontainable emotion as we respond to something more than we are able to express is lost if we no longer think in terms of our religion as the fear of the Lord.

It is probably worth stressing here that we are not saying that we need more fear of God’s punishment to scare us off of sin. It is true that God is holy, and it is true that any who persevere in sin are not saved and should expect to be judged. But my attempt at seeking to recapture the fear of the Lord as an intense expression of our love for God is not an attempt to water down the grace of the gospel and make our salvation less sure. It is not an attempt to introduce terror and undermine the nature of saving grace to get more performance out of you. But rather by stressing the surety of our salvation, by the overwhelming nature of God’s grace to unworthy sinners, we see that our obedience, our love, our

trust, our fear is drawn out of us, provoked by the unbelievable goodness of God to us. It is not an empty posturing, it is not a craven fear of punishment that undermines the gospel, but a whole souled response to the goodness of God.

As we return to Psalm 130 we can see how this fear is expressed by the psalmist in the rest of the psalm. V5-6, 'I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.' He expects the God who is willing to forgive his sins to hear his prayers. If God is willing to deal with the greater problem of our sins then he can expect God to be merciful for his other needs as well, which gives the faith to wait upon the Lord, but wait with hope.

V7-8, 'O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.' As so often happens the forgiven sinner whose sins have been forgiven is confident that God will save others. That if God is true in keeping His promises to give grace to any who humble themselves; God will keep all His promises including saving His people. The small experience of salvation makes the saint think of the big picture and God's big plan of salvation for His people. These expressions of the fear of the Lord as faith-filled and expectant prayer; as well as broadcasting of God's plan to save and confidence that God will finally save are the certainties that the fear of the Lord has.

Growing in fear

We want to think for a few minutes about how we are to grow in the fear of the Lord. We grow in the fear of God as we grow in the knowledge of God as Savior. The devils have a knowledge of God but they tremble in fear, knowing God only as a judge. We want a fear that results in heart felt love and devotion. Some theologians have distinguished between knowing God as Creator and knowing God as Father. If the goodness of God and His willingness to save in Christ is not clear then a wrong sense of fear will take us. If we only see His power; if we only think of Him as a judge; if we view the purity of His holiness, but know nothing of His tenderness to sinners; of His patience towards sinners; of the willingness on His part to save us. If we do not know Him as slow to anger and always ready to forgive; that He will give grace to any sinners who humbles themselves in His presence, we will not have a godly fear but an ungodly fear. The devil loves to hide this aspect of God making Him out to be fixated on rules and denying us things, like he did with Adam and Eve in the garden. It is for this reason that John Bunyan recommends that the best place for us to learn the fear of God is at the foot of the cross. Michael Reeves has written an excellent book on the fear of God, and commenting on John Bunyan writes (and I will end with this): 'There is another reason the cross is so fertile a soil for the fear of God. For the grace of God serves as a bread-crumbs trail, leading us up from the forgiveness itself to the forgiver. In the light of the cross, Christians not only thank God for his grace to us but also begin to praise him for how beautifully kind and merciful he reveals himself to be in the cross. "Oh! that a great God should be a good God," wrote John Bunyan, "a good God to an unworthy, to an undeserving, and to a people that continually do what they can to provoke the eyes of his glory; this should make us tremble."²

Bunyan was insistent that the most powerful change of heart toward a true fear of God comes at the foot of the cross. With striking wisdom, Bunyan wrote of how the cross simultaneously cancels the believer's guilt and increases our appreciation of just how vile our sinfulness is:

For if God shall come to you indeed, and visit you with the forgiveness of sins, that visit removeth the guilt, but increaseth the sense of thy filth, and the sense of this that God hath forgiven a filthy sinner, will make thee both rejoice and tremble. O, the blessed confusion that will then cover thy face.³

It is a “blessed confusion,” made of sweet tears, in which God’s kindness shown to you at the cross makes you weep at your wickedness. You simultaneously repent and rejoice. His mercy accentuates your wickedness, and your very wickedness accentuates his grace, leading you to a deeper and more fearfully happy adoration of the Savior.

It is not just that we marvel at the forgiveness itself. Left there we could still be full of self-love, not *enjoying* the Savior but using him hypocritically as the one who’ll get us out of hell free. We are led from the gift to wondering at the glory of the giver, from marveling at what he has done for us to marveling at who he is in himself. His magnanimity and utter goodness undo us and fill us with a fearful and amazed adoration.’³

³ <https://theaquilareport.com/fearing-god-is-a-matter-of-the-heart/> accessed 12/14/2023