

BRIEF  BOOKS

# FEARING GOD

...so we don't have to be afraid

DAVID MEARS



**D**o you sometimes find yourself feeling embarrassed or uneasy when the idea of ‘fearing God’ comes up in the Bible? Would you invite your friends and family to a special guest service at church if you knew that was going to be the message?

Fear is taboo in Western society. Fear curtails freedom; it crushes dreams; it inhibits people. It should be avoided altogether.

But some kinds of fear are healthy—just as some kinds of fearlessness are foolish.

There is bad fear and good fear. And, oddly enough, fearing something can mean we are no longer afraid of it.

In this short book, David Mears takes us back to the Bible to look again at the fear of God—and more than that, to take delight in it and discover why the fear of the Lord really is “the beginning of wisdom”.

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*Fearing God*

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# INTRODUCTION

**W**e don't really 'do' fear these days. Fear is one of the current taboos in Western society, along with things like regret, guilt and submission. These are all weaknesses that stop you from realizing your full potential. They are all to be avoided, ignored and denied as much as possible.

And so if you do feel afraid, you're not supposed to admit it. Just think of what you hear people say after a terrorist attack. Among many familiar refrains, there's always this one: "We will not let the terrorists win. We will not let them change our way of life." Of course, terrorist attacks do change our way of life. We tighten our security; we do things differently. But we won't admit it. We're too proud, too defiant. We want to be fearless. Fear curtails freedom; it crushes dreams; it inhibits people. Fear is bad, bad, bad. And

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if fear is bad, then the ones we are frightened of are worse. People who frighten other people are bullies—angry, tyrannical, self-interested people incapable of sympathy or empathy.

So we are generally not interested in an angry, fearsome God. I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say, "If that's what God is like, I'm not interested". And as Christians it's easy to acquiesce, brushing hastily over these parts of God's character. We can find ourselves feeling kind of embarrassed when the idea of fearing God comes up.

But some kinds of fear are actually healthy—just as some kinds of fearlessness are actually stupid. There is bad fear and good fear. And so in this Brief Book David Mears helps us to re-examine the fear of God—and more than that, to actually delight in it.

*Emma Thornett*  
*Editor*

## 1. WHY BE AFRAID OF FEAR?

The day of the guest service has arrived—the culmination of weeks of planning, prayers, and many nervous “Hey, our church is holding a guest service this Sunday, and I was wondering...” type of conversations. To your joy and terror, a number of your friends said yes. So now, as you enter the building with your guests, you find yourself experiencing a peculiarly elevated sense of awareness of *everything* that is going on at church. Your nose picks up the smell of the carpet, your eyes are drawn to the small wad of breakfast cereal tenaciously clinging to the welcomer’s chin, and then of course as you sit there’s the slightly tacky texture of the pews (you hope it is just deteriorating lacquer and not the accumulated sweat of a thousand parishioners). Still, everything has gone well so far. The congregation

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has been friendly, the leading has been tight, the music has been great. But then the preacher gets up and says this:

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. Thus are all you that are never passed under the great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all that were never born again, and made new creatures, and raised from being dead in sin, to a state of new, and before altogether unexperienced light and life... you are thus in the hands of an angry God...

As each subordinate clause bludgeons itself against the congregation's ears your heart beats faster, your anxiety builds, and no amount of air conditioning can prevent the breakout of perspiration as you frantically think through how you might smooth things over with your guests over lunch: "He was a guest preacher—it's not normally like this!"

## 1. WHY BE AFRAID OF FEAR?

And then you wake up and realize to your great relief that it was all a dream. You'd never hear a sermon like that today.

That quote was from Jonathan Edwards' classic sermon 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God', preached in 1741 in Connecticut.<sup>1</sup> Under Edward's preaching, thousands turned to Christ. Thousands wised up and rushed into the gracious arms of the Saviour whose atoning death on that old rugged cross bore the wrath that was, by rights, theirs to face. Jonathan Edwards had no problem putting 'the fear of God' into his listeners. But it is different now: you really wouldn't hear a sermon like that today. We don't do 'fear' so much. We would rather win people to heaven than scare them from hell. We would much prefer that people's hearts were stirred by love for God and not fear of him. Of course, helping people come to see the love of God is a praiseworthy thing. However, in the process of stressing what we see as 'the positive', we have neglected a way of understanding God that the Bible would go so far as to describe as "the beginning of wisdom".

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<sup>1</sup> You can find a free PDF of the full text of this sermon at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/54/>.

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The fear of God turns up more than 200 times in the Bible—and that is just the phrase itself. The concept is actually on display far more frequently. The fear of God is a prominent theme in the Bible, but how often does fearing God come up in Christian conversation? How often does it feature in the advice we give one another on how to live for Jesus? Even though it is revealed by our God to be the foundation of wisdom, there is hardly a book written on the subject. In preaching, we rarely hear it spoken about apart from the occasional passing reference while going through a book of the Old Testament. Even then, what we often hear is some brief remark along the lines of “Now of course the fear of God doesn’t mean being scared of God; it’s more about reverence and respect”. Are we sure about that? Does the fear of God mean anything *except* what you and I would actually call ‘fear’?

### **Afraid of the negative**

Why don’t we talk about fearing God more often than we do? I suggest it is because we are afraid of fear. We might like the odd horror movie or scary thriller, but that kind of fear is safe. It is fear with no implications for us or those we love. You walk out of the cinema