

The background is a classic landscape painting. It features a majestic mountain range with rugged, rocky peaks and patches of snow or light-colored rock. The sky is filled with soft, golden light, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. In the foreground, a dense forest of tall, dark evergreen trees stands on the right side. On the left, a calm lake reflects the surrounding landscape. A herd of deer is gathered at the water's edge, some standing and some partially submerged. The overall mood is serene and majestic.

Union

*WHAT DOES
IT MEAN
TO FEAR
THE LORD?*

*MICHAEL
REEVES*

“Modern people often view the fear of God with disdainful suspicion, but Michael Reeves shows us that godly fear is really nothing other than love for God as God. Reeves also helps us to see that the greatest factor in promoting the fear of God is knowing his grace in Christ. As John Bunyan said, ‘There is nothing in heaven or earth that can so awe the heart as the grace of God.’ This wonderful book not only teaches but sings, leading us to ‘rejoice with trembling’ (Ps. 2:11).”

Joel R. Beeke, President and Professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“We used to sing a hymn that said, ‘O how I fear Thee, living God! With deepest, tenderest fears.’ No longer. But the hymn’s first lines remind us of what we are missing: ‘My God, how wonderful Thou art, Thy majesty, how bright.’ Only those who find God to be ‘wonderful’ and his majesty ‘bright’ experience the ‘tenderest’ fear. So we have a problem; but thankfully help is at hand in *What Does It Mean to Fear the Lord?* Like an elder brother, Michael Reeves guides us into a fresh understanding of the fear of the Lord. On the way, he introduces us to some of his friends—masters in the school of discipleship—who have walked the path before us. Join him on the journey. You will soon discover why ‘the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him’ (Ps. 147:11).”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, the Bible says, and reading this book will make you wise—wise to who God is and what God requires of us by way of loving, responsive discipleship. Packed full of historical nuggets, *What Does It Mean to Fear the Lord?* deserves to be widely read. ‘Walking in the fear of the Lord’ is language that has largely disappeared from the contemporary church. The result is the insipid quality of a great deal of current Christianity. Recapturing the sense of God’s incomprehensible greatness and holiness is the needed antidote this book provides. An absolute gem of a book.”

Derek W. H. Thomas, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina; Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary

“Ours is a day of great fears—fear of financial collapse, fear of terrorist attacks, fear of climatic disasters, fear of a deadly pandemic—all kinds of fears, except the most important of all: the reverential fear of God. How needed then is this marvelous study of a much-neglected theme, one that is central to the Scriptures and vital to human flourishing.”

Michael A. G. Haykin, Chair and Professor of Church History, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Michael Reeves has given us something we badly need and likely haven’t realized—a fresh encounter with the thrilling fear of the Lord. This book will bring renewed devotion and delight. Having read it, I can’t wait to read it again!”

Sam Allberry, apologist; Associate Pastor, Immanuel Church, Nashville, Tennessee

*WHAT DOES IT MEAN
TO FEAR THE LORD?*

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A book series edited by Michael Reeves

Rejoice and Tremble: The Surprising Good News of the Fear of the Lord, Michael Reeves (2021)

What Does It Mean to Fear the Lord?, Michael Reeves (2021)

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For Rob and John, my dear friends

In a perfect Friendship this Appreciative Love is, I think, often so great and so firmly based that each member of the circle feels, in his secret heart, humbled before all the rest. Sometimes he wonders what he is doing there among his betters. He is lucky beyond desert to be in such company. Especially when the whole group is together, each bringing out all that is best, wisest, or funniest in all the others. Those are the golden sessions; when four or five of us after a hard day's walking have come to our inn; when our slippers are on, our feet spread out towards the blaze and our drinks at our elbows; when the whole world, and something beyond the world, opens itself to our minds as we talk; and no one has any claim on or any responsibility for another, but all are free-men and equals as if we had first met an hour ago, while at the same time an Affection mellowed by the years enfolds us. Life—natural life—has no better gift to give. Who could have deserved it?

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Series Preface

OUR INNER CONVICTIONS AND VALUES shape our lives and our ministries. And at Union—the cooperative ministries of Union School of Theology, Union Publishing, Union Research, and Union Mission (visit www.theolo.gy)—we long to grow and support men and women who will delight in God, grow in Christ, serve the church, and bless the world. This Union series of books is an attempt to express and share those values.

They are values that flow from the beauty and grace of God. The living God is so glorious and kind, he cannot be known without being adored. Those who truly know him will love him, and without that heartfelt delight in God, we are nothing but hollow hypocrites. That adoration of God necessarily works itself out in a desire to grow in Christlikeness. It also fuels a love for Christ's precious bride, the church, and a desire

SERIES PREFACE

humbly to serve—rather than use—her. And, lastly, loving God brings us to share his concerns, especially to see his life-giving glory fill the earth.

Each exploration of a subject in the Union series will appear in two versions: a full volume and a concise one. The concise treatments, such as this one, are like shorter guided tours: they stick to the main streets and move on fast. You may find, at the end of this little book, that you have questions or want to explore some more: in that case, the fuller volume will take you further up and further in.

My hope and prayer is that these books will bless you and your church as you develop a deeper delight in God that overflows in joyful integrity, humility, Christlikeness, love for the church, and a passion to make disciples of all nations.

Michael Reeves

SERIES EDITOR

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 agonize over all the 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 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? 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). Indeed, the most frequent command in Scripture is “Do not be afraid!”

Yet, again and again in Scripture we are called to fear. 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.” In the New Testament, Jesus describes the unrighteous judge as one “who neither feared God nor respected man” (Luke 18:2). Paul writes, “Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1).

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 wishing that “the fear of God” were not so prominent an idea in Scripture. We have 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 we meet in the gospel. Why would any God worth loving *want* to be feared?

DO NOT BE AFRAID!

My aim now is to cut through this confusion. I want you to rejoice in this 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 fear. And I want to show that for Christians “the fear of God” 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. 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 has the fear of the Lord—but he is not reluctant about it. Quite the opposite: 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, and political turmoil. Our private lives 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 keep discovering 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. As a whole, we are an increasingly anxious and uncertain culture.

And therein is an extraordinary paradox, for we live more safely than ever before. Though we are safer 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? Quite simply, our culture has lost God as the proper object of fear. That fear of God (as I hope to show) was a happy and healthy fear that controlled our other fears, reining in anxiety. With our society having lost God as the proper object of healthy fear, our culture is necessarily becoming more neurotic and anxious. 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, and society fills with anxieties.

The Fearful Legacy of Atheism

The suggestion that loss of the fear of God is the root cause of our culture's anxiety is a real blow to atheism. For atheism sold the idea that if you liberate people from belief in God, that will liberate them from fear. But throwing off the fear of God has not made our society happier and less fretful. Quite the opposite.

So, what does our culture do with all its anxiety? Given its essentially secular self-identity, our culture will not turn to God. The only possible solution, then, must be for us to sort it out ourselves. Thus, Western 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.)¹ Yet that attempt to eradicate fear as we would eradicate 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 that in a culture awash with anxiety, fear is increasingly seen as *wholly* negative. And Christians have been swept along, 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. It is understandable, but it is tragic: the loss of the fear of God is what ushered in our age of anxiety, but the fear of God is the very antidote to our fretfulness.

A Rose by Any Other Name Would Smell as Sweet

The fact is that not all fear is the same, or unhealthy, or unpleasant. We must distinguish between different sorts of fear, between wrong fear and right fear. That is what we will do now. Then we can rejoice in the fact that the fear of God is not like fears that torment us. Then we can appreciate how it is the one positive, wonderful fear that deals with our anxieties.

“Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”

2 CORINTHIANS 7:1

We all have experienced fear at some point. And if we are honest, we don't usually think of fear as a good thing. So why does the Bible call us to *fear the Lord*? In this book, Michael Reeves explains that the fear of God is not a gloomy fear marked by anxiety but a heartfelt and happy enjoyment of God as Creator and Redeemer. As we learn more about the surprising good news of the fear of the Lord, we will discover the vital role we play in displaying to the world the awesomeness of our God.

“Recapturing the sense of God’s incomprehensible greatness and holiness is the needed antidote this book provides. An absolute gem of a book.”

DEREK W. H. THOMAS

Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina

MICHAEL REEVES (PhD, King’s College, London) is president and professor of theology at Union School of Theology in Bridgend and Oxford, United Kingdom. He is the author of numerous books, including *Delighting in the Trinity*; *Rejoicing in Christ*; and *The Unquenchable Flame*.

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