

THE FEAR OF GOD

BY JOHN BUNYAN

With an Introduction by Douglas Wilson

The Christian Heritage Series
Published by Canon Press
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, Idaho 83843
800.488.2034 | www.canonpress.com

John Bunyan, *A Treatise Concerning the Fear of God*
Christian Heritage Series edition copyright ©2022.
First published in 1679

Cover design by James Engerbretson
Cover illustration by Forrest Dickison
Interior design by Valerie Anne Bost and James Engerbretson
Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data forthcoming

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INTRODUCTION

The fear of God is greatly misunderstood by modern Christians, and unfortunately, a large part of the misunderstanding comes from Christians trying to head off the misunderstanding. Whenever someone urges the virtue of the “fear of the Lord,” someone will rush in to explain that this fear does not mean being *afraid*, and will cite 1 John 4:18—“perfect love casts out fear.”

Now it is quite true that 1 John 4:18 teaches us an important truth about our relationship with God. The fear of the Lord is not craven. It is not servile or slavish. It does not crawl like a dog that has been “beat too much.” A raw fear of punishment is a far cry from the spirit of adoption that we have been given in Christ. Nevertheless, the Bible uses the word *fear*, in a positive sense, in multiple places. We are to work out our salvation with *fear*, and notice also that it is with *trembling* (Phil. 2:12). The fear of the Lord does not stroll into the throne room of the Ancient of Days, hands in pockets, whistling carelessly.

CHAPTER 1

Object and Reasons of Fear

This exhortation is not only found here in the text, but is in several other places of the Scripture pressed, and that with much vehemency, upon the children of men, as in Eccles. 12:13; 1 Pet. 2:17. I shall not trouble you with a long preamble, or fore-speech to the matter, nor shall I here meddle with the context, but shall immediately fall upon the words themselves, and briefly treat of the fear of God.

The text, you see, presents us with matter of the greatest moment, to wit, with God, and with the fear of him.

First, it presents us with God, the true and living God, Maker of the worlds, and Upholder of all things by the word of his power; that incomprehensible Majesty, in comparison of whom all nations are less than the drop of a bucket, and than the small dust of the balance. This is he that fills heaven and earth, and is everywhere present with the children of men, beholding the evil and the good; for he hath set his eyes upon all their ways.

So that considering that, by the text, we have presented to our souls the Lord God and Maker of us all, who also will be either our

Savior or Judge, we are in reason and duty bound to give the more earnest heed to the things that shall be spoken, and be the more careful to receive them, and put them in practice; for, as I said, as they present us with the mighty God, so they exhort us to the highest duty towards him: to wit, to fear him. I call it the highest duty, because it is, as I may call it, not only a duty in itself, but, as it were, the salt that seasons every duty. For there is no duty performed by us, that can by any means be accepted of God, if it be not seasoned with godly fear. Wherefore the apostle says, "Let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28). Of this fear I would discourse at this time; but because this word *fear* is variously taken in the Scripture, and because it may be profitable to us to see it in its variety, I shall choose this method for the managing of my discourse, even to show you the nature of the word in its several, especially of the chief, acceptations.

I. Then by this word *fear*, we are to understand God himself, who is the object of our fear.

II. By this word *fear*, we are to understand the word of God, the rule and director of our fear.

I. Now, to speak of this word *fear*, as it is thus taken, it respects God himself, who is the object of our fear.

By this word *fear*, as I said, we are to understand God himself, who is the object of our fear; for the Divine Majesty goeth often under this very name himself. This name Jacob called him by, when he and Laban chided together on Mount Gilead, after Jacob had made his escape to his father's house: "Except," said he, "the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the Fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely thou would have sent me away now empty." So again, a little after, when Jacob and Laban agreed to make a covenant of peace with each other; though Laban, after the jumbling way of the heathen by his oath, puts the true God and the false together, yet

CHAPTER 2

The Role of Fear, and its Several Kinds

I shall now come to the second thing, to wit, the rule and directory of our fear.

Of this word *Fear*, as it is taken for the word of God, the written word of God; for that also is, and ought to be, the rule and directory of our fear. So David calls it; “The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever” (Ps. 19:9). The fear of the Lord, that is, the word of the Lord, the written word; for that which he calleth in this place the fear of the Lord, even in the same place he calleth the law, statutes, commandments, and judgments of God. “The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever: the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” (ver. 7–9). All these words have respect to the same thing; to wit, the word of God, jointly designing the glory of it. Among which phrases, you see, this is one, “The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever.” This written word is, therefore, the object of a Christian’s fear. This is that also which David intended when he

said, "Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (Ps. 34:11). I will teach you the fear, that is, I will teach you the commandments, statutes, and judgments of the Lord, even as Moses commanded the children of Israel; "Thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up" (Deut. 6:7).

That scripture also in Isaiah intends the same; where the Father saith of the Son that he shall be "of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord"; that he may "smite the earth with the rod of his mouth" (Isa. 11:3-4). This rod in the text is none other but the fear, the word of the Lord; for he was to be of a quick understanding in it, that he might smite, that is, execute it, according to the will of his Father, upon and among the children of men.

Now, this, as I said, is called the fear of the Lord, because it is the rule and directory of our fear. For we know not how to fear the Lord in a saving way without its guidance and direction. As it is said of the priest that was sent back from the captivity to Samaria, to teach the people to fear the Lord; so it is said concerning the written word, it is given to us, and left among us, that we may read therein all the days of our life, and learn to fear the Lord. See Deut. 6:1-24; 10:12; 17:19.

And here it is that trembling at the word of God, is even by God himself not only taken notice of, but counted as laudable and praiseworthy, as is evident in the case of Josiah (2 Chron. 34:26-27).

Such also are the approved of God, let them be condemned by whomsoever they may. "Hear the word of the Lord, ye that tremble at his word; your brethren that hated you, that cast you out for my name's sake, said, 'Let the Lord be glorified': but he shall appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed" (Isa. 66:5).

Further, such shall be looked to by God himself, cared for and watched over, that no distress, temptation, or affliction may

CHAPTER 3

The True Character of the Fear of God

In now come, in the next place, to treat of the grace of fear more immediately intended in the text, which I call a lasting godly fear. And first, by way of explication, by which I shall show,

I. How by the Scripture it is described.

II. I shall show you what this fear flows from.

I. For the first of these: how by the Scripture this fear is described; and that,

(1.) More generally.

(2.) More particularly.

(1.) More generally. It is called a grace, that is, a sweet and blessed work of the Spirit of grace, as he is given to the elect. Hence the apostle says, "Let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28); for as that fear that brings bondage is wrought in the soul by the Spirit, as a Spirit of bondage; so this fear, which is a fear that we have while we are in the liberty of sons, is wrought by him as he manifesteth to us our liberty. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor. 3:17); that is, where he is a Spirit of adoption, setting the soul

free from that bondage under which it was held by the same Spirit, while he wrought as a Spirit of bondage. Hence, as he is called a Spirit working bondage to fear, so he, as the Spirit of the Son, and of adoption, is called "The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord" (Isa. 11:2). Because it is that Spirit of grace that is the author, animator, and maintainer of our filial fear, or of that fear that is son-like, and that subjected the elect unto God, his word, and ways; unto him, his word, and ways, as a Father.

This fear is called also "the fear of God," not as that which is ungodly is, nor yet as that may be, which is wrought by the Spirit as a Spirit of bondage; but by way of eminency, namely, as a dispensation of the grace of the gospel, and as a fruit of eternal love. "I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me" (Jer. 32:40).

This fear of God is called "God's treasure," for it is one of his choice jewels, it is one of the rarities of heaven; "The fear of the Lord is his treasure" (Isa. 33:6). And it may well go under such a title, for as treasure, so the fear of the Lord is not found in every corner. It is said, "All men have not faith" (2 Thess. 3:2), because that also is more precious than gold, the same is said about this fear. "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18), that is, the greatest part of men are utterly destitute of this goodly jewel, this treasure, the fear of the Lord. Poor vagrants, when they come straggling to a lord's house, may perhaps obtain some scraps and fragments, they may also obtain old shoes, and some sorry cast-off rags, but they get not any of his jewels; they may not touch his choicest treasure; that is kept for the children, and those that shall be his heirs. We may say the same also of this blessed grace of fear, which is here called God's treasure.

It is only bestowed upon the elect, the heirs and children of the promise; all others are destitute of it, and so continue to death and judgment.