

## The Fear of God vs. Sin (Exodus 20:18-21)

Preached November 12, 2023, by Pastor Phil Layton ([www.gcb.church](http://www.gcb.church))

Please open God's holy Word to the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of Exodus. God thundered 10 Commandments that His own finger will later inscribe on stone tablets. How will God's people respond to God's giving His Law? Ex 20:18: *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**<sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but **do not let God speak to us, lest we die.**"<sup>20</sup> 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.**"<sup>21</sup> The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.*

Notice in Ex 20:20 fearing Him helps believers to not sin, but v. 20 starts by saying 'Fear not...'

- So which is it? Are God's people to *fear not* or to *fear God*? Yes!
- Ex 14 ends with Israel fearing God rightly but it also says '*fear not*' about Pharaoh, v. 13
- Samuel told Israel '*do not be afraid ... Only fear the LORD*' (1 Sam 12:20, 24).
- Isa 8:12 '*do not fear what they fear... But the LORD... Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.*'
- So much of our tension in life is because we don't live in this tension (right/wrong fear).
- There's unhealthy self-centered fear, but there's a healthy God-centered fear we need.
- I fear we don't hear enough about fearing God and we don't fear God enough.
- I'm convicted my struggles with sin would be far less if feared God far more.

This subject of fear comes next after the 10 Commandments and it's crucial to keep us from sin.

**Because it's so important, this will be a 2-part message (today fearing God vs. sin)**

Over 150x in scripture the people of God are encouraged to fear God.<sup>1</sup>

- And more than twice as many times, scripture repeats the phrase in v. 20 '*fear not.*'

Pastor Dale has said 'fear not / don't be afraid' 365x in the Bible to match 365 days in the year.

- Every day we need to hear it. '*Do not be afraid/anxious.*'
- But it's not just '*fear not,*' it says '*fear Him (God).*'
- It moves a scared self-focus to a sobered God-focus fear.
- For believers, being God-fearers cures anxieties and causes other fears to fade.
- Not a paralyzing fear that's afraid of God, a proper fear that's active toward God.
- Sin wants to stay away from God but God calls us to come in fear to stay away from sin.

Godly fear is a missing doctrine today but it's a great help against sin and great hope for sinners

- Today's study outline:**
- 1. Fearing God vs. sin in history**
  - 2. Fearing God in future prophecy**
  - 3. Fearing God in the gospel for today**

**Point: God calls us to keep fearing Him to keep from sin**

OT Israel didn't just fear the external sights and sounds, they feared because of internal sin. Spurgeon on context: 'This terrible grandeur may... suggest to the people the condemning force of the law. Not with sweet sound of harp, nor with the song of angels, was the law given; but with an awful voice from amid a terrible burning... battalions of Omnipotence marshaled upon the scene; the dread artillery of God, with awful salvos, adding emphasis to every syllable.'<sup>2</sup>

What did this mean for Israel historically? The NT gives an inspired commentary in Heb 12: '*At that time his voice shook the earth... a voice, whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them... so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear"*...' [then v. 25 applies what

it meant for them and us] *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.*<sup>3</sup>  
 If just hearing God's law is so frightening, how terrifying to meet God after breaking the Law?

Pr 13:13 *He who despises the word will be destroyed, But he who fears the commandment will be rewarded.*<sup>4</sup>

- God wanted Israel and us to hear and fear so we don't refuse His Word and its warnings.
- Some today wish 'if only I could hear directly from God like in Bible times, it'd be great.'
- Don't beg for that, if you got it like Israel did you'd be begging for it to stop like them.
  - We have God's sufficient Word, that's enough to keep us busy without wanting more.
  - Don't refuse His Word as it's spoken by His messenger today.
  - God says in Isa 66 '*hear the word...you who tremble at my word.*'

Israel hears and fears, middle of Ex 20:20 says fearing God is to remain with you to restrain sin.

In a parallel passage, Dt 5, Moses said Israel said to him '*God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire...why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, we shall die. For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire as we have, and has still lived? Go near and hear all that the LORD our God will say, and speak to us all that the LORD our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it.*' "And the LORD heard your words, when you spoke to me. And the LORD said to me, 'I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you. **They are right in all that they have spoken. Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them ...forever...**[Dt 6:24 adds] *the LORD commanded us...to fear the LORD our God, for our good always...*'

God says this '*forever,*' not just for OT Israel. Fearing Him is always the heart He's looking for

Fearing God is for our good that it will go well. God says Israel spoke right,

- He **is** a consuming fire and a danger for sinners to hear or be near.
  - It's **right** to fear and be in awe that they're still alive after hearing God from the fire.
- Israel got it, they need a go-between spokesman to relay and mediate God's word to them.

- God desires we always have this heart to fear and obey Him.

The problem with sinners in Rom 3:18 is: '*there is no fear of God before their eyes*'

Ex 20:20 says fearing God keeps from sin, and the Deuteronomy passage says it keeps the law: '*that you may fear the LORD your God...by keeping all his statutes and his commandments*' (6:2, so fear keeps).

Dt 8:6 '*you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him.*'

Dt 17:19 says as one reads the word *he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law*

... Jerry Bridges counted over a quarter of all verses on fear are tied to keeping/obeying scripture<sup>5</sup>

The conclusion of the whole matter: *Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*

That's Eccl 12:13 and that's *man's all<sup>6</sup>* for all of mankind.

- Fearing God is an all-important duty.

Pr 16:6 '*by the fear of the LORD one keeps away from evil*' (NAS, others '*turns away from evil / avoids evil*'<sup>7</sup>).

- Fear in the Bible isn't just respect or reverence or to be redefined to have no real fear.
- It's often linked with trembling even in NT (Phil 2:12 *with fear and trembling*).
- Fear affects the whole person.

Pr 8:13 '*The fear of the LORD is to hate evil...*' That's emotional and even relational, hating what it does to God.

Fearing God hates sin like He does, and hates to grieve the Spirit of God who we love

In Ex 20:20, one writer says 'be afraid of offending him through sin, and...fear would function as a discipline to keep...from sin. This is, in fact, always the value of the much-encouraged fear of God in Scripture. Being afraid of the consequences of disobeying God is among the most

helpful attitudes any believer can possibly have. Those who try to suggest that the various commands to fear God are merely encouragements to hold him in some sort of honor or awe completely miss the point that fear is a beneficial guiding mechanism for human behavior... Fear of death or injury helps people drive safely; fear of heart attacks helps people keep their cholesterol levels low; fear of academic failure helps people study and learn; fear of harming children helps keep marriages together. Fear is a basic motivator of human behavior, and attempts to deny that the Bible actually tells us that we should fear God are quite misplaced.<sup>8</sup>

**But human self-centered fear leads to sin, while God-centered fear leads away from sin**

Don't just fear consequences for your sake, fear offending God for the sake of a relational love.

- I'm using the phrase 'godly fear' to differentiate from the ungodly fear natural to sinners.
- The first time we see fear in scripture is Adam after sinning (*'I was afraid so I hid myself'*).
- Adam's son Cain also went away from God's presence and was afraid he would be killed.
- Abraham feared for his life and wife, saying *'surely there is no fear of God in this place.'*
- Lot feared and fled the Lord's judgment, and others fear when they hear or are near God.
- But God said Abraham feared God when his faith was willing to offer his son Isaac.
- Fear that's godly has faith in God.

**It's not the fear of a slave in Exodus ch 2 (beat to death), it's fear in the Savior**

Go back to ch 14 to see this in context, as Yahweh saved Israel from slavery. They feared death but He led them through the sea and drowned their enemies. 14:30 *Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.*<sup>31</sup> *Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people **feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD** ...[so godly fear has faith, and worship like **15:11**] *"Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, **awesome** ...<sup>14</sup> The peoples have heard; they **tremble**; pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia.<sup>15</sup> Now are the chiefs of Edom **dismayed**; trembling seizes the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan have **melted away**.<sup>16</sup> **Terror and dread** fall upon them... [v. 18] *The LORD will reign forever and ever.*"**

- Godly fear worships God as almighty, awestruck at His awesome holy majesty.
- The unsaved can only tremble in the sense of dismay, dread, terror, and melt away afraid.
- But the saved fear and believe and bow in humble adoration and awesome wonder.
- They sing 'how great Thou art' and 'tis grace that taught my heart to fear.'
- As sinners before a holy God, we fear, but amazing grace our fear relieves and saves.
- Grace teaches hearts to fear and fall forward, tremble and trust

**The unsaved fear and flee or fall back, Christians fear and fall toward God, we flee to Christ**

- Godly fear isn't servile fear of ch 1, scared by a quota of bricks to make without straw.
- It's not a slavish fear of being beat mercilessly by harsh taskmasters in that same chapter.
- It's not dread or terror like Jewish mothers felt when Egyptians came to kill their babies.

It's not being afraid of the King killing you as Moses was in ch 2 and fled to stay far away

- It's not even the fright of Egyptians in the plagues who heed the word for their animals.
- It's not the fear of Pharaoh, it's the fear of faith in the gracious Redeemer from Pharaoh.
- Think fear of displeasing your father.

**I feared discipline of my dad growing up, but I knew he loved me (and hurting him hurt me)**

Go back to ch 4 and this is the relationship context of the Exodus, God's family fatherly claim. 4:22 *Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son,<sup>23</sup> and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me."*...

- So Israel isn't just God's 'people,' they're His precious son, His beloved firstborn.

- They'd serve Him as Father, fearing displeasure or discipline, but not doom.

That's the context of Ex 20:20, fearing Him keeps you from sin in loving relationship with Him

- A son knows there's consequences for disobedience
  - o but he'll always be a son, not a mere slave.

**The Lord is Master and owns us and we must serve Him, but remember what we read earlier**

Ps 103: *'As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to **those who fear him**. For he knows our frame [i.e., weakness as frail children of dust, feeble] ...the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on **those who fear him**, and his righteousness to **children's children**... For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his **steadfast love toward those who fear him**' (v. 13-14, 17, 11).*

**This should make Israel and us bless the Lord O my soul who redeems and crowns with love**

## That's #1, fearing God vs. sin in history, now #2. Fearing God in Future Prophecy

Turn to Jer 32 (prophet after Isaiah and before Ezekiel).

- Ex 20:20 says God came to test Israel, but Israel repeatedly failed the test of fearing God.
- They didn't keep from sin or keep the law so God sent prophets with words of hope.

Jer **32:39** is His promise for future Israel and a day His grace will teach their hearts to fear: <sup>39</sup> *I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them.* <sup>40</sup> *I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.*

- This sure hope for Israel is God-given fear that won't turn away, and there's hope for other nations, too.

**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**... [it adds shalom].*

- Notice the prophet keeps linking fear to hope and God's good that He rejoices to do.
- A hope for the world: Even as Israel is in a war on terror, one day Israel's enemies will tremble in fear.
- In Exodus, one nation hears and fears, but one day all nations will hear and fear as they see this.

**33:16** *In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely [hasn't happened yet]... <sup>25</sup> Thus says the LORD: If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the fixed order of heaven and earth, <sup>26</sup> then I will reject the offspring of Jacob ...*

- As long as there's day and night He's not through with the Jews which is good news for Gentiles, too.

Isa 59:19 says even enemy nations and coastlands, *'shall **fear** the name of the LORD from the west...a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression...'*

- Paul quotes that in the end of Rom 11 for an end time salvation of Israel and the fullness of the Gentiles.
- Jonathan Edwards also connected the prophecy in Hosea 3:4:

*'the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod [that's been true since 70 A.D. but later in v. 5] Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king, and they shall come **in fear to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days.***

Again in end times prophecy, fear of the Lord brings goodness.

- It's been many days since King David, I take this as the Davidic King or son of David.
- Israel will turn to Jesus as Messiah-King in latter days.

Since the temple's destruction in 70 AD Israel has had no sacrifices or priest-ephod many days.

- But in latter days prophets say they'll have the Prince of Peace as priest and God as King.

It isn't peace in the Middle East now but the hope is His goodness as Israel fears, trusts Jesus.

Edwards: *'Nothing is more certainly foretold than this national conversion of the Jews is in the 11th chapter of Romans. And there are also many passages of the Old Testament that cannot be interpreted in any other sense...prophecies of the calling of the Jews...Judah and the 10 tribes shall be brought in together...The prophecies of Hosea especially seem to hold this forth...'*<sup>9</sup>

Iain Murray's book [The Puritan Hope](#) traces the majority Puritan view of Israel's salvation

We sang earlier Amazing Grace by Puritan pastor John Newton (1700's). This also amazed him 'we have what may be called a standing miracle continually before our eyes...the Jews [many] endeavored to exterminate...are still preserved by his wonderful providence... [many centuries later] many ages they have lived as the prophets foretold they should, without a temple, without sacrifice or priest (Hosea 3:4-5)... But at length "the fulness of the Gentiles shall come in, and all Israel shall be saved" (Rom. 11:25-26). The revolutions and commotions in kingdoms and nations, which astonish and perplex politicians, are all bringing forward this great event.'<sup>10</sup>

**That's the hope we need to pray for Israel and Gentiles, a fullness of Palestinians to come in**

Even Egypt, ancient archenemy of Israel in the Exodus, has hope in prophecies of Egypt's salvation. Isa 19:16 LSB *'In that day the Egyptians will...tremble and be in dread...'<sup>18</sup> In that day five cities in the land of Egypt will be...swearing allegiance to Yahweh...'<sup>20</sup> And it will become a sign and a witness to Yahweh of hosts in the land of Egypt; for they will cry to Yahweh because of oppressors, and **He will send them a Savior** [Hebrew Yeshua, or Jesus]...and He will deliver them.<sup>21</sup> Thus Yahweh will make Himself known to Egypt, and **the Egyptians will know Yahweh in that day. They will even worship**... [it describes true worship and God] will be moved by their entreaty and will heal them.<sup>23</sup> In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians will come into Egypt and the Egyptians into Assyria, and the **Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.**<sup>24</sup> **In that day Israel will be the third party with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth,**<sup>25</sup> whom Yahweh of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed is **Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel...**"*

**Isa 19 has hope for Israel and its enemies that they'll have fear and faith in that day to come**

Egypt is on the border of Gaza and Assyria in Isaiah's day covered modern Syria, Iraq, and other Arab peoples. That's a day to pray for, Jews, Muslims converting to Jesus. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Him

### **That takes us to our 3<sup>rd</sup> and final application: Fearing God in the gospel for today**

Rev 14:6 in the end times John sees an angel messenger *'with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people...with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory 15:4 Who will not fear...and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you'*

**The gospel calls sinners to repent and revere and receive Jesus as Lord and Savior**

2 Cor 5:11 NAS *'knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men...'<sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.<sup>21</sup> He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

- We should fear as sinners before a holy judge,
  - o but a sin-bearing Mediator brings reconciliation.

Israel in fear begged for Moses to be a go-between on their behalf, Jesus is ours on our behalf!

- Jesus fulfilled all righteousness as a perfect law-keeper
  - o and died on the cross as a lawbreaker.

Jesus had no sin but had our sin imputed to Him, and His sinless righteous life is imputed to us.

- God treated Jesus as if He lived our sinful life
  - o and treats believers as if we lived His perfect life

**As ambassadors of Christ, we persuade, appeal, implore, beg you: turn and trust Him**

Ernest Reisinger said Christ 'explained the law's meaning, expressed the law's character embodied the law's duties, and endured the law's penalty.'<sup>11</sup>

What Israel fears in Ex 20, Jesus fulfills. Rom 8 says in Christ no condemnation now we dread. Heb 12:18 tells NT Christians *'you have not come to...a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ...'<sup>22</sup> 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,<sup>23</sup> 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,<sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...*

Newton again: Let us praise and sing and wonder, let us praise the Savior's name  
He has hushed the law's loud thunder, He has quenched Mount Sinai's flame<sup>12</sup>

PTL we're not under the old covenant standing far off begging for Moses to be our mediator.

- We have a better mediator in Jesus and better new covenant that forgives our lawbreaking

Unlike Israel in Ex 20 who couldn't approach, we can boldly approach the throne of grace.

- Through Christ there is mercy and help in our time of need. The God we fear is merciful.
- Lk 1:50 '*his mercy is for those who **fear him** from generation to generation.*'

On a cross next to Jesus one begged for mercy and to be remembered in the kingdom and he said to his partner: '**Don't you fear God**...we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."<sup>13</sup> His fear led to faith and that day in Paradise. Jesus died and when He rose again, the women who witnessed the resurrected Lord went in fear and great joy.<sup>14</sup>

**It was then that Jesus called believers His family: 'Go tell my brothers...'** (Jn 20:17)

Even as they fear the Lord Jesus, He calls sinners family. He's not ashamed to call us brothers.

Pastor Corey just preached 1 Pet 1:17: '*if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear...*' Why? We were redeemed with the Lamb's precious blood.

Ex 14 pictures that and Ex 19 says God brought them to Himself a special treasured possession. That's the context of Ex 20:20, fearing Him keeps you from sin in loving relationship with Him

**Not fearing like before a judge, come before your holy Father with reverent love**

Spurgeon: 'not afraid of our Father...as loving children we feel a holy awe and reverence as we realize our relationship to him...a dear, loving, tender, pitiful Father, yet...who "is greatly to be feared..." filial, childlike fear...lest we should do anything contrary to his mind and will... holy fear leads us to dread anything which might cause our Father's displeasure...we love and fear'<sup>15</sup>

May this change how we think and speak of God as we grow in holy fear of our holy Father.

- At Mt. Sinai Israel trembled as the law was given.
- At Mt. Calvary Jesus was given for our violations of the law.

We'll sing 'I trembled at the law I'd spurned, then my guilty soul imploring turned at Calvary.'

- At that other mount, mercy is great and grace is free.
- So let's praise God for that pardon and go proclaim His fear and love to others

<sup>1</sup> As counted by Jerry Bridges in *The Joy of Fearing God*

<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Mediator—the Interpreter" (No. 2097), *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (1890; repr. London: Banner of Truth, 1970), 35:409.

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 12:26, 19, 21, 25.

<sup>4</sup> NKJV.

<sup>5</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Joy of Fearing God* (Waterbrook Press, 1997), 155.

<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:13 NKJV "Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all."

<sup>7</sup> ESV, NIV84.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A History of Redemption* (Yale University Press, 1989), Works of Jonathan Edwards, 9:469.

<sup>10</sup> *Works of John Newton*, Volume 4, Sermon 32.

<sup>11</sup> Ernest Reisinger, *The Law and the Gospel*, p. 36 (in the original, 'its' is used instead of 'the law's' for character, duties, and penalty).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>12</sup> John Newton, "Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder."

<sup>13</sup> Luke 23:40-43 NIV84.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 28:8.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Michael Reeves, *Rejoice and Tremble: The Surprising Good News of the Fear of the Lord* (Crossway, 2021), 100-102.