

The Fear of God, part 2: fear of man (Exodus 20:20)

Preached November 19, 2023, by Pastor Phil Layton (www.gcb.church)

Jerry Bridges tells the tale of Butch McGregor who enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps at age 18. At boot camp, Butch feared failure and the drill instructor's verbal intimidation and humiliation. Even the slightest infraction or insignificant error earned Butch 50 pushups or 10 laps to run. The drill instructor demanded unquestioned humble respect and his every word was absolute law. Butch trembled to fail and he knew his life was no longer his own as an enlisted soldier. It was about the army, not about him. He was always on high alert for a feared surprise barracks inspection, dreading being found not ready.

'Rifles were meticulously cleaned, boots were polished to a mirrorlike sheen, barracks were well-scrubbed, and beds were tightly made. When General Collins [the revered man himself!]...entered the barracks, Butch stood stiffly at attention...Fear gripped him as the general carefully looked him over with cold, steely eyes and asked him a question. Butch's mouth was dry as cotton as he sought to answer respectfully. He experienced a profound sense of awe as he, a lowly, humble recruit, stood in the presence of this Marine Corps general [far superior to the Sargeant and command he knew].

[Later on during a wartime deployment] General Collins was promoted to major general and became the commanding officer of Butch's division...Butch was eventually [promoted and] selected to be the general's driver. Butch had mixed emotions...he remembered those cold, steely eyes on that memorable inspection day...[but he] soon discovered that behind those steely blue eyes was a no-nonsense general who was tough but fair. As he listened to the general's conversations with other officers riding in the car, Butch was often amazed at the general's evident wisdom and military skill... His awe for [him] actually increased, though its dominant aspect was no longer fear but respect and admiration...Butch had always *shown* respect...now he *felt* respect...he had even begun to like the general...Despite this growing personal relationship though, Butch never lost his sense of awe toward the general. He was always conscious of the vast difference in rank...always addressed...as "Sir."

Then one day [in dangerous territory]...the car struck a land mine. General Collins was thrown clear of the car ...Butch, meanwhile, remained trapped in the front seat of the burning vehicle. Despite the general's own injuries, and at the risk of his life, he managed to pull Butch out of the car to safety [imagine his fear and trembling after his fiery rescue]...General Collins soon recovered sufficiently to resume his duties but Butch remained in the hospital for weeks. Despite the pressure of commanding a division in battle, the general often stopped by to see Butch...despite the vast difference in rank, the general genuinely loved him. Now, in addition to [Butch's] sense of awe, respect, and admiration, [he] began to experience love and gratitude toward the general...He determined that he would be the best driver any marine general ever had. But...they would never be buddies. It would always be "yes sir"¹

With that story in mind let's turn to the book of Exodus and chapter 20.

- This will be part 2 of a study on the fear of God and I hope that illustrates a key part of it. The context is Israel at a base camp in Horeb being prepared for battles ahead of them.
- These fearful young believers are learning God's word is law and He must be respected. They're learning it's not about them, it's about the Commander they've been enlisted to.
- This is no drill instruction; this is a live test.

Ex 20:20 *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."* Last week was a foundation of what fearing God is, today more application.

Outline: 1. The blessing of fearing God rightly

2. The bondage of the fear of man (context and broader biblical context)

The right fear of God was to test and bless and protect from sin, as we saw last time.

The Bible says often ‘*blessed are those who fear the Lord*’ (Pr 28:14, Ps 115:13, 112:1, 128:1, 4).

Think of the army story:

- it’s good to be ready where we live, ready for action or an inspection.
- Butch’s relationship with the general started with healthy fear that led to blessing for him.
- The searching eyes of our Lord should make us tremble, to truly want to please and honor
- At any time, we may have to give an account--that gives me spiritual cotton mouth.
- But as we know God more, raw anxiety turns to respectful admiration
 - o We have awe and amazement at His wisdom, skill, fairness, and kindness

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and also of wonder, love, and praise

We both show and feel respect and love for how He rescued us from death and sin.

- Heaven’s general didn’t just risk his life, He laid down His life for us on the cross.
- Sometimes it causes us to tremble and oftentimes it causes us to have humble gratitude.
- Jesus took the fiery death and judgment for us and He visits us and cares for us in love.
- That motivates us more than the initial terror--we want to do our best to honor supremely.
- But not buddies, it’ll always be ‘*Yes, Lord.*’

It’s highest respect, reverence, and recognizing who He is, we even ‘*rejoice with trembling*’ Ps 2:11

Jerry Bridges has a great book to study that further: [The Joy of Fearing God](#)

Michael Reeves wrote Rejoice & Tremble: The Surprising Good News of the Fear of the Lord.

On Ex 20:20: ‘Moses here sets out a contrast between being *afraid* of God and *fearing* God... Evidently there are different types of fear. Indeed, there are different types of *fear of God*... [He surveys older Reformed writers] John Flavel distinguished between “sinful” and “religious” fear; George Swinnock wrote of “servile” and “filial” fear; ... Gurnall of “slavish” and “holy” fear; and John Bunyan, of “ungodly” and “godly” fear... William Bates[:]. . . “awful admiration of his goodness, for this fear doth not contract...but enlargeth the heart in God’s praises.”... Thomas Boston summed up...[wrong] fear dreads nothing but hell and punishment. [A healthy] fear dreads sin itself...with love to...a holy father...[Reeves concludes it’s a falling forward in faith, joyful trembling or ‘sacred delight’] quaking in wonder, love, and praise...the fear which pleases him is not groveling, shrinking fear [but]...how overwhelmingly kind and magnificent, good and true God is, and that [right fear] therefore leans on him in staggered faith and praise.’²

He argues the English word fear doesn’t fully define it but neither does any other single word

Lewis doesn’t define but describes: ‘He’s not safe, but He’s good, He’s the King, I tell you.’³

- He’s not a tame lion. I love lion exhibits at zoos and I love that there’s a safe barrier.
- Protective glass means he won’t kill me, but as he comes close, my heart skips.
- My pulse rises a bit as he draws near, and I see more closely majesty and mighty power.
- I’ve seen lion shows and what they’re capable of and it makes me awe (all ooh and ahh).
- I’ve heard a lion purr and it shook me and then it gave a smile that’s hard to put in words.
- Imagine the blessing of hearing a lion roar!

Think of little Simba being attacked but then Mustafa comes to conquer the enemies

When your eyes are on a lion, in that moment you forget your worries, fears, and tears. Rev 5:4 ‘*Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll...*’ [and it goes on to say those who with the lion on their side in the kingdom will reign on the earth].

Hosea 11:10 promises for Israel in the end times: ‘*They shall go after the LORD; he will roar like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west;*¹¹ *they shall come trembling like birds from Egypt...*’

Have you ever come trembling repenting to the Lord? Are you in Christ, safe by faith in Him?

Jesus said ‘fear Him who has the power to cast soul into hell.’ Trust Him, come to Him to save.

- There’s another exodus in the end times, where God will again call His son out of Egypt.
- And they’ll come trembling from there and from the west as Jesus the lion roars.
- Moses earlier wrote Messiah will be a lion from Judah who you don’t dare rouse
 - o and all nations will obey, Gen 49:10
- And the context of Hosea isn’t just for Israel being saved, Gentiles will trust and tremble.
- Hosea 11 is applied to Jesus in Matthew’s gospel as true Israel for all who come to Him.
- The blessing goes beyond end times to eternal worshipful fear of all His people, Rev 19:5

The Bible’s last mention of fear is more intimate than a loving general or father

- That context is the bride of Christ meeting the bridegroom before the wedding supper.
- I can still remember wedding day butterflies in my stomach, my knees knocking up front.
- There’s joyful fears and tears I still get, even when I officiate I quake a bit to take it all in.

Husbands, do you remember seeing your bride come down the aisle?

- Did you have overwhelming overpowering adoration? Did you ‘rejoice with trembling’?

That’s the closest we get in this life to prophecies of the next life, Christ’s return for His bride.

The fearful day of the Lord will be joyful and wonderful for His beloved church

It’s the day when kings and nations will tremble at His voice, and all creation rises to rejoice.⁴

- Ex 19 is language of a covenant ceremony, where God commits love to Israel
 - o as her husband she’s to revere.

Israel is later told ‘*fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you.*’⁵ Ps 130:4: ‘*with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.*’ 145:19 *He fulfills the desire of those who fear him...* 147:11 ‘*the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him...*’

That’s some of the blessing of fearing God, but there’s also #2 the bondage of the fear of man.

Look again at Ex 20:20 *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.”* There’s a test to come for each of us: who or what will we fear?

- Don’t be afraid or anxious about yourself, self-centered (that’s fearing a person, yourself)
- Don’t fear other people either, that’s sin and fearing God is to be before you so you don’t
- God-centered fear brings us blessing, but human-centered fear brings us bondage and sin
- In the context of v. 17 it can be coveting a neighbor’s approval, accolades or affirmation
- The 10th commandment isn’t just coveting another’s possession, it can be another’s praise

We fear criticism or conflict or just not being cool because we fear man

In 12:43 says some feared confessing Jesus ‘*for they loved human praise more than praise from God*’ (NIV, or NAS ‘*loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God*’).

- I think that also relates to Ex 20:3: ‘*You shall have no other gods before me.*’
- People can be gods. A people-pleaser eclipses God.
- Anything about man we put in the place God should have violates His command and is fearing man.
- And that fear is a bondage.

Rom 8:15 talks about ‘the slavery to fall back into fear’ vs. calling on our Abba Father

In Ex 20 v. 2, God says right before this that He brings His people out of the house of slavery.

- If we put people before God, it’s the opposite of His purpose in redeeming and freeing us.
- We can make idols of people liking us and speaking well of us, violating the 2nd commandment.
- Fear of man can also drive #8, you steal so you can impress others with what you have.

Fear in the Bible isn’t only or mainly having dread, it’s whatever dominates or drives you.

- Don’t think just a scared elevated heart-rate, think who you supremely elevate above all.

What is biggest to you and what do you care about most, what others say/think or God?

Fear of people=consumed by their assessment vs. fear of God=consumed with God's assessment

We could look at all 10 relating to fearing God vs. man.

- v. 16 is often tied to fearing people's opinions of us
- we lie because we're embarrassed or we don't want others to think less of us.

In v. 17, coveting can also be a controlling consuming fear another has what I can't do without.

- Moses wrote later 'you shall not fear man' (Dt 1:17 NAS).
- That's a command, so fearing man is sin.

Go back to ch 1. Maybe the best way to see fear of man vs. God is in the context of this book.

Heb 2:16 says 'fear of death [makes] subject to bondage...' but God lets His people go free

Pharaoh was king of the most powerful nation in the world at this time. Ex 1:15: *Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah,* ¹⁶ "When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." ¹⁷ *But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them* ...In other words, they feared their heavenly King more. What God said dominated them drove what they did.

You might also say they were already free of bondage before the rest of Israel was liberated?

Go to ch 4 and Moses didn't initially do as well as these women. He's no fearless hero when God told him to go 4:1 *Then Moses answered, "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice..."*

- That's the excuse we can give, too, why we don't speak of the Lord and His Word.
- They won't believe or listen, the gospel offends.

The fear of man is a snare and sin when we disobey God's command to proclaim His truth

¹⁰ *But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue."*

- That can be our excuse, too: I'm not great at giving the gospel like Ray Comfort with his great accent.
- I'm slow to respond to objections or don't know all the answers.

God replies basically I'm sovereign over where you're weak or how you're wired, don't fear man, I'm with you

When we fear man because of our inadequacies, trust God's presence, power and promises

Now go to ch 14 and this is after the plagues and after the slaves left, but they fear men of Egypt pursuing them. The end of 14:10 says as Pharaoh's armies drew near, Israel 'feared greatly.' v. 13: *Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today..."*

- And Israel sees one of the biggest miracles ever in the red sea,
- v. 31 says they saw His power against Egypt so they feared God.

They feared Him as bigger than their fears of little men in comparison (like David-Goliath)

Ed Welch has a hugely helpful book When People are Big and God is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man. He explains it as people-pleasing or when I'm 'controlled by what other people might think (and they probably thought much less often about me than I imagined, which was another problem)...*Are you overcommitted? Do you find it hard to say no even when wisdom indicates you should? You are a people pleaser. Do you "need" something from your spouse or your friend? ...to listen to you? Respect...When you do not have it, you will feel empty and hopeless because you don't have what you need or angry because you deserve what you need [in your mind and me focus, the man you fear can be in the mirror] ...Is self-worth or self-esteem a critical concern? ...your life revolves around what others think ...Are you always second-guessing decisions because of what other people might think? ... Do you get easily embarrassed? ...to use biblical language the opinions of others to the point where you are ruled by them...[Welch says in his life what held him in fearing man was] felt needs, desires, or lusts were big...I feared other people because people were big, my desires were even bigger, and God was small...The most radical treatment for the fear of man is the fear of the Lord. God must be bigger to you than people are...Regarding other people, our problem is that we need them for ourselves rather than we love them for the glory of God.' ⁶ Our need is to love.*

Our need isn't men's love (approval, appreciation, etc.) it's to love others as God loves us

Jesus summed up the 10 commandments as love God with all you are

- and love your neighbor as much as you already love yourself.
- I don't need more love for me, I need to love others more.

It starts with loving God as #1 in my heart, soul, and mind, then love others, not me as #1.

- Ex 20 is about loving Him to keep His commands,
- including loving men instead of fearing men.

Christ's perfect love casts out fear of imperfect men and it makes it our ambition to please Him⁷

Our kids say they need this or that, but a wise woman said 'no you *want* that, you *need* Jesus'

He says your Father knows what you need (what you'll eat, drink), seek God first, don't fear.⁸

- Besides true necessities (food, water, bed), Lk 10:42 says 1 thing is needed, to hear Him.

But some think the Lord and His commands aren't enough, men need to add legalism to fear.

Gal 2:4 says some want '*our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage...5:1 Stand...in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage*'⁹

Religious legalistic fear of man is a bondage--we need to stand in our liberty in Christ

Some of you don't care what other people think, but that can still be man-pleasing

- you're the man you aim to please, not God. You do or say what *you* feel, not fearing God

I grew up fearing to have to talk to people and I still have to battle the fear of man regularly.

- In junior high I was voted the most shy kid in the school (kinda weird, but that was me).
- In grade school I was so fearful about not being on the right team for a school event
 - o so I hid in the bathroom for hours till it was over (sometimes feet up in the stall)!

In seminary if I would ever say something in a big class there was a big fear factor right before.

- Even while studying how big and great God is, my thoughts of self or others were too big

I've shared before the first time I preached to a big SS group I was gripped with fear of man.

- Knees knocking literally crazily that morning,
 - o but as I've shared before the key was reciting Josh 1:8-9.

In that context, Israel feared giants in the land, but a bigger God promised to be with them

Turn to Prov 29. This week playing bball I totally feared my teammates disapproval as I missed.

- When I messed up, one guy's body language messed me up—and I don't even know him!
- It was like I was back in jr. high all over again seeking approval from the good players.

I wanted to impress and not just help my team and some moments I fell into fear instead of fun.

- I had to keep catching myself and still do, letting positive or negative feedback be too big

I got over it easier than I used to, but in other settings I can be overcome by what men think/say.

2 Pet 2:19 '*by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage*' (NKJV)

Pr 29:25 *The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.*

- Another translation has '*fearing people is a dangerous trap, but trusting the LORD means safety*' (NLT).

Our family has been watching some of the survival shows where they lay snares to trap animals to survive.

- A snare traps so you can't get out and one of the kids here this week told me about a dog stuck in a trap.
- It needed help to get out and I thought of Gal 6:1

'if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted' (NAS).

- Think of trespassing on another man's property and your foot is caught in a bear trap you can't get out.

You need help from spiritually-minded believers gently to restore, release you, but not step in it themselves.

- Trusting God is safety but fearing man is a trap all can step in.

People-pleasing has an ensnaring enslaving power to look out for in us and help others out of

Gal 1:10 asks *Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? ...If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ* (NIV). I can't serve Christ and be a people-pleaser at the same time.

Go to Pr 19. Fearing man is a dangerous bondage but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe from it.

19:23 *The fear of the LORD leads to life, and whoever has it rests satisfied; he will not be visited by harm.*

- The way out of the fear of man trap is a bigger fear of the Lord, being satisfied, content with Him.
- Go back to ch 14 and there's more on that.
- Look at 14:26 *In the fear of the LORD one has **strong confidence**, and his children will have a **refuge**.* ²⁷ *The fear of the LORD is a **fountain of life**, that one may turn away from the snares of death.*

The way to turn from the bondage of the fear of death or fear of man is the fear of the Lord

If He's bigger than life and our biggest love and trust than we'll fear nothing else in life.

Ps 56:3 *When I am afraid, I will trust in You. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not fear. What can man do to me? Why fear man if the worst he can do is send to heaven? v. 9 *This I know: God is for me.**¹⁰

- David wrote that in bondage to Philistines trying to kill him, but if God is for us who can be against us? David knew the bondage of the fear of man, but he writes in Ps 118:5 the Lord *'set me free.* ⁶ *The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?* ⁷ *The LORD is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph...* [he saw God on his side as bigger than his fears] ⁸ *It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man.'*

Why didn't John the Baptist fear Herod? He said Jesus *'must increase, and I must decrease'*

We started with Moses whose life was transformed from fearing man to fearing God.

- Criticism or approval ratings faded as a growing fear of God kept him from sin, Ex 20:20.
- Let's end with a NT example: Peter who denied Jesus 3x for the fear of man (even a girl).

Peter was transformed, too, Jesus re-commissioned Him and promised to be with him always.

- The power of the Spirit made Peter fearlessly preach to thousands:
 - o you killed your Messiah, but repent and be forgiven.

Christ was with him inside on his side so he didn't fear what man did on the outside. 1 Pet 3:14 NKJV: *do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.* "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear

v. 2 says wives can win even unsaved husbands by reverent conduct (same Grk word)

Jude 23: *'save others...show mercy with fear...* ' Not just in witness, in work, Eph 6:5: *'with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ,* ⁶ *not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers...*

- This is for all of life, wanting to please Christ in all we do.
- Eph 5:21: *'be subject to one another in the fear of Christ'* (NAS).

Repent of fearing man and read 'big God' passages like Isa 40, Job 38-42, study His attributes.

- Read When People are Big and God is Small.
- Above all pray that He increase and you decrease.

A closing prayer: Ps 119:38 *Establish Your word to Your servant, As that which produces reverence for You.*

Our Father in heaven, thank you for sending your Son to free us from the fear of death and hell. We thank you that even in the valley of the shadow of death we fear no evil, for you are with us. We thank you that in the shadow of the Almighty we need not fear the terror by night or by day. We will not need through the earth is moved or the Sierra mountains are cast into the sea. You fearfully wonderfully made us, make us to fear nothing but You, to revere you like no one else. We know so much in our world is deceptive and fleeting but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Help the women here to fear you above what any women think and men to fear you and not fear men. Free us from peer pressure and people pleasing to please Christ, in His name.

¹ Jerry Bridges, “A Parable of Awe,” in *The Joy of Fearing God* (Waterbrook Press: Colorado Springs, 1997), 13-16.

² Michael Reeves, *Rejoice and Tremble* (Crossway, 2021), 30-31, 110, 59.

³ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, scene where Mr. Beaver talks with the Pevensie children.

⁴ “Behold Our God.”

⁵ 1 Samuel 12:24.

⁶ Edward T. Welch, *When People are Big and God is Small* (P&R Publishing, 2023 2nd edition), 13-18, 132, 21

⁷ See 1 John 4:18 and 2 Corinthians 5:9 NAS.

⁸ Luke 12:29-32.

⁹ NKJV.

¹⁰ HCSB.