

Fearing and Hearing with Trembling (Isaiah 66:1-5)

Please take your Bibles and turn to Isaiah chapter 66. If you're using a pew Bible on the chair in front of you you'll find it on p. 404. This morning for my first message of the new year I want to go to the Old Testament. We've been in the NT on Sunday mornings for several months and we'll be back next week in our series on the glory of Christ in the book of Revelation, but for today I want to look at some old truths from the OT for this new year. Our focus today will be more practical than prophetic, but all God's Word is profitable for teaching, rebuke, correction, and training. We're to declare the whole counsel of God, Genesis to Revelation, not shrinking back from any part, showing how every part applies and ties in to the gospel. Today I want to step back and look at something that won't be new to many of you, but it's something vital to always review and to renew each year, each day, pursuing humility, repentance, and the fear of God as we hear His Word.

The last 2 chapters of Isaiah's prophecy overlap with Revelation's prophecy in the last book of the Bible, but I want to zero in on Isaiah 66:1-5 for how this great prophecy applies its great truths of the future to the present, how we should then live in light of our big and glorious God in humility and in unity with our fellow worshippers. With God's help I want to begin 2015 thinking about fearing and hearing with trembling. Some of you have heard me speak on this before and you've heard me say a high view of God and His Word is always most foundational to us as Christians in our fearing God and as a church in our hearing of God's Word with trembling. I don't think we can hear this too much or make too much of God and His Word. So let's give attention and reverence to the holy Word of our holy, holy, holy God:

Isaiah 66:1 (ESV) *Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?"² All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word...*

[now look at v. 5] *Hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble at his word*

...

PRAY

Revelation says there's an eternal gospel to be proclaimed to the world with these words "*Fear God and give Him glory...*" (Rev 14:6-7). Fearing God is part and parcel of the gospel and glorifying God. A Puritan pastor Jeremiah Burroughs wrote a book [Gospel Fear: or the heart trembling at God's Word](#)¹

Its preface to the Christian reader begins: 'it highly concerns you to get [this message] into your heart ... Ah, Christians, your hearts are never in so good a frame, so safe a frame, so sweet a frame, so happy a frame, so gospel a frame as when they are in a trembling frame...a child of God trembles under the sense of God's goodness and kindness to him. Hosea 3:5[says they] *shall fear the Lord and His goodness*, or...*because of His goodness...trembling...* tremblings and gladness are consistent with each other (Ps 2:11 [*rejoice with trembling*]), and as holy fear and joy are consistent together, as you see in those good women who went from Christ's [tomb] with fear and great joy (Matthew 28:8)...a holy love and trembling are consistent together.¹²

Earlier in Isaiah it says '*his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord*' (Isa 11:3) and there is this paradox in Scripture of fear, of reverencing with rejoicing. Right here in Isa 66, we're called in v. 5 to hear God's Word with trembling, and in v. 10 we're called to rejoice, the middle of the verse says '*rejoice with joy.*' In v. 2 our hearts are to be humble, contrite, fearful. In v. 15 our hearts are to be full of rejoicing. This path to gladness is by lowliness, brokenness. A humble contrite spirit in v. 2 trembling at God's Word is a rejoicing spirit. A high view of God and His Word should result in a low view of ourselves. Scripture often says we must humble ourselves before we will be lifted up. Our joy in the Lord has to do with fearing Him and how we're hearing Him

66:1 begins with a high view of God. He's enthroned in the heavens. He's exalted over the earth that's under His feet like a little footstool compared to His majesty and massiveness. He doesn't need us to build Him a house. He doesn't need to rest ever. He doesn't need us and He doesn't need our help. In v. 2 He reminds Israel that whatever they would try to make for Him they would have to make out of what He's made for them. God isn't impressed at man-made structures, but there is a God-made spirit v. 2 impresses upon us.

'him who is humble and contrite of spirit and who trembles at my word...' A high view of God should cause us to have a high view of God's Word, that we treasure and tremble at. And it should cause us to have a low view of us, as v. 2 also says. It should make us tremble and it should make us humble. Look back at chapter 57 for a cross-reference on this in the same context.

57:15 *For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite. [NKJV calls it a 'humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite']*

Isa 66:1-2 says the same thing. The Supreme God who is high and exalted only dwells with those who are lowly, humble, and contrite in spirit. Or put another way, the Exalted One only dwells with those who know they are not

That helps us understand in context what Isa 66:2 means 'to this *one* I will look' - it's another way to say this is where God looks to dwell. Not in a big building, but in a believer who knows he or she is not big but is humbled by a big God. Isa 66:2 says this is the one type of person, the only person God looks to. Of course God sees everything, but for God to *look to* is different. At the end of v. 4 God says of ungodly Israelites '*they did what was evil in my eyes and chose that in which I did not delight.*' God didn't look with His eyes in delight on them, but He does look in v. 2 on others, look in delight. Habakkuk 1:13 says God's eyes are too pure to look on sin, He can't *look to* a sinner in that sense. But He does look in favor on contrite repentant sinners. God looks in opposition on the proud but looks to give grace to the humble.

The force of Isa 66:2 is 'this is the one and only type of person I will look at with favor, look to give grace to, look to dwell with, look to take delight in.' So we need to look at what God looks at to bless and revive or encourage. God isn't looking for a few good men, He's looking for a few God-humbled sinners who know they're not good, but who are contrite or repentant at sin, and who are trembling or reverent as they come to hear with fear His Word. He's not looking for outwardly religious people, He's looking for repentant people inwardly, that's what *contrite in spirit* means. He's not impressed by houses of worship, He wants hearts of worship, not external righteousness.

Listen to how God looks at prideful unrepentant irreverent worship in v. 3: '*He who slaughters an ox is like one who kills a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog's neck; he who presents a grain offering, like one who offers pig's blood; he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations;*⁴ *I also will choose harsh treatment for them and bring their fears upon them, because when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, they did not listen; but they did what was evil in my eyes and chose that in which I did not delight.*'⁵ *Hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble at his word:* [i.e., reverent worshippers]

The strongest language possible is used of those who do are not humble, repentant, tremblers at God's Word. Those who don't fear God and hear His Word with humility, repentantly, reverently, God will not look at with grace

Verses 3-4 may not surprise or shock you as much as it would the original readers. But God's Word commanded OT Israel to sacrifice of oxen, lambs, grain and memorial offerings in OT times. If He were speaking of worship in NT times the idea of v. 3 might be: *He who does spiritual things without the attitude of Isaiah 66:2 is in God's eyes like a cold-blooded murderer. He who sacrificially gives to the church but never gives up his sin doesn't please God any more than those who give money to terrorist organizations. He who tithes his offerings religiously or takes the communion cup without a repentant reverent heart might as well be drinking pig's blood. Someone who prays to God before eating a meal with a heart that is not humble and broken before His Word is like a pagan mindlessly praying to some statue.*

This is key: Doing the right religious things without a humble, repentant, trembling heart doesn't please God anymore than the most heathen acts of unbelief or idolatry. The *Expositor's Bible Commentary* says it this way: "The most sacred exercises of true God-given religion are like the worst of sins when they are divorced from humility of spirit." (Isaiah, p. 352)

To go through the motions, even saying and doing religious exercises while cherishing and delighting in wickedness in your heart is as offensive in the eyes of God as Sodom and Gomorrah. This is how Isaiah began his book in Isaiah 1:1 *The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem ...*¹⁰ *Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!*¹¹ *"What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough ...*¹³ *Bring no more vain offerings ... [i.e., empty worship by the unrepentant]*
 [next week we'll see in Rev 11:8 God calls sinful Jerusalem 'Sodom']

Isaiah 29:13 said sinful Israel honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him. In chapter 6 Isaiah saw he was a man of unclean lips before a holy, holy, holy God. Isaiah said *'woe is me, for my eyes have seen the King...'* so he fell humble, contrite, and trembling at God's Word. And it was then that God looked on him with cleansing grace and lifted him up. It's this same Isaiah who wrote Isa 66:2 from his own experience; God looks at those who are humble and contrite of spirit and who tremble at God's Word.

How can we avoid being a great offense to God? How can we be people He looks on with favor, and looks to give grace to, and lifts up to bless, comfort and cleanse so we can be used by him in a sinful world like Isaiah's? I asked in my first message as a pastor here in 2006: if God will continue to look at Gold Country Baptist Church with favor, what is the key He requires of us?

The answer is the same in 2015 as it was when Isaiah wrote in AD 700ish. Isaiah 66:2 tells us: be humble, be repentant, be trembling at God's Word. If our church is to grow next year spiritually we must come to hear God's Word hungry and humbly, repentant and reverent. If your interactions with the Word and with others aren't marked by the things Isaiah 66:2 is talking about you're not the type of person God looks to bless this year in grace and growth. That should make us tremble, and fearful of displeasing God. And a healthy fear and trembling before God helps us hear His Word with benefit.

You could paraphrase our text: God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. I don't want to be a pastor God opposes. We don't want to be people God opposes. But God gives grace to the humble and He graciously gives us this passage. Be humbled at the greatness of God in v. 1, the God who graciously looks in v. 2 to those who are '*humble and contrite in spirit*'

The first word for humility has to do with being poor or needy, knowing it's how you are spiritually. Contrite means stricken or smitten, even disabled. It's only used 2 other times in the OT, both times of the physical lameness of Mephibosheth (2 Sam 4:4, 9:3), as a cripple, unable to walk. Here it's a spiritual disability, inability, brokenness we sense. But by amazing grace, our massive majestic and infinite God chooses of all things to condescend and dwell with the lowest of hearts, and to revive them and them alone. It's the grace of Jesus that comes to the crippled man and heals withered hands.

Ps 34:18: "*The Lord is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit*" (NKJV, other versions 'crushed in spirit'). If you want to study further what a contrite spirit looks like, Ps 51 is a picture of what God desires: '*a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise*' (v. 17). The implication is God despises worship from unrepentant hearts, hearts that are not broken and contrite in spirit over sin. A song says 'Brokenness is what I long for, brokenness is what I need. Brokenness is what God wants from me.' Brokenness is next to godliness. This is a convicting truth, but it's a comforting truth for those who know the words of Jesus: *Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek...* (Matthew 5:3-5). When I was teaching on the beatitudes I read an old prayer called Valley of Vision

Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly,
You have brought me to the valley of vision,
where I live in the depths, but see you in the heights;
hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold your glory.

Let me learn by paradox
 that the way down is the way up,
 that to be low is to be high,
 that the broken heart is the healed heart,
 that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit³

This is the only type of person, the only place God looks to – not a big place like the house Israel built for God. It's a little place, in a lowly human heart that is humble and contrite and v. 2 adds one *who trembles at God's Word*. He doesn't live in temples, He dwells in trembling hearts. 2 questions: what does that look like in real life, and then how do we cultivate that in our life?

If God looks for those who tremble at His Word, what does that look like? The context of v. 3-4 gives the negative flip-side, but v. 5 gives the positive side to define it: *Hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble at his word...* So trembling before God's Word has to do with how we hear God's Word.

The Hebrew word 'hear' includes the ideas of heeding or obeying. Husbands sometimes hear their wives in the sense of the English word but they're not really listening in a biblical sense. We might even nod and make noises but I've been convicted I need to be a better listener. Sometimes I'm technically hearing through my ears part of what someone says but I'm formulating the next thing I want to say or just not hearing. One of my 4-year-olds once said 'dad, how come sometimes you say mmm, but you're not really listening?'

Well, the Hebrew word for "hear" in v. 5 means more: it means to hear with attention, to listen carefully, diligently, attentively, responsively. Sometimes it's translated 'obey' (ex: 51:10). In Isa 66:2 it means to obey with reverence, to be attending with trembling. It includes fear of God as we hear His Word. In Isa 64:1 the same word 'tremble' was used for the quaking of a mountain.

In Exodus 19 as God's Word came to Israel at Mt. Sinai, it says *'the whole mountain trembled greatly'* and it says *'all the people in the camp trembled'* (v. 19, 16). Then in the next chapter after God's Word in 10 commandments was given it says *'the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." 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 healthy fear of God and His Word keeping from sin – not self-centered fear focused on us, a God-centered fear focused on Him.

It's a reverence but we don't want to limit to that so we strip it of trembling. The book *Gospel Fear* says of Israel in Isaiah's day: The Jews who were so into the Law, should have remembered that the "mountains shook and trembled when the Law of God was given. And God expects that the hearts of sinners should tremble when they hear the Law of God at any time."⁴

It includes the idea of physical trembling. When Daniel heard the Word of God through a messenger in Dan. 10:11 he says '*while he was speaking this word to me, I stood trembling...*' When Jeremiah received the Lord's word to preach judgment, he wrote '*All my bones tremble...because of His holy words*' (Jer. 23:9 NAS). When the prophet Habbakuk received the Word of judgment, he wrote '*I heard and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered...in my place I tremble*' (Hab. 3:16 NAS). But it's not just for prophets, it's what all believers are called to here in Isa 66. In the Christian church, Paul brought God's Word '*in fear and much trembling*' (1 Cor 2:3).

In Ezra 9:4 and 10:3 those who trembled at the Word were those repenting. If you've never trembled at God's Word spiritually, you may not be saved?

- In Mark 5:33 a woman comes trembling to Jesus, and Jesus says her faith has saved her (or made well, usual Greek word for salvation)
- In Acts 9:6, Paul hears the Word of the Lord speaking audibly and He asks trembling what He should do, he's saved and then baptized
- The Philippian jailer, trembling from the earthquake in Acts 16, asks what he must do to be saved. The answer: *believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved*. If you've never trembled before God and turned from your sins to trust in Jesus Christ as Lord, be afraid, be very afraid at coming wrath and beg Christ to be merciful to you
[you don't have to tremble physically, but fear spiritually]

Hear the word of the Lord in Psalm 2: *Take warning ... Worship the Lord with reverence...with trembling. Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry, and you perish in the way, For His wrath may soon be kindled* [some translations say 'kiss the Son,' i.e., love, embrace God's Son in faith] *How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!*" (v. 10-12 NAS). Jer. 5:22: "*Do you not fear Me?*" declares the Lord. '*Do you not tremble in My presence?*

In the book of Romans it's unbelievers who do not glorify God and have '*no fear of God before their eyes*' (3:18, 23). If you've never feared you need to fear and hear His Word with trembling like Paul, the jailer, and that woman. Come to the cross in trembling faith and trusting treasuring faith in Christ. We all broke the law of Mt. Sinai, but Jesus was broken for us at another Mt

I trembled at the law I'd spurned, Till my guilty soul imploring turned **To Calvary**.

Mercy there was great, and grace was free; Pardon there was multiplied to me;
There my burdened soul found liberty, At Calvary.⁵

Like the woman who came trembling, another woman Fanny Crosby wrote:

Near the cross, a **trembling soul**, Love and mercy found me
There the bright and morning Star shed its beams around me. In the cross, in the cross ...⁶

Because of the cross we don't need to fear hell or evil or even Satan himself

The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him ...
[Why? Our great God] wraps Himself in light and darkness has to hide
It trembles at His voice, trembles at His voice, how great is our God!⁷

Psalm 29 says the voice of the Lord is powerful and majestic, it breaks the cedars, makes the forests stripped bare, and shakes the wilderness. And the greatness of our God should cause us to tremble at His voice as He speaks in His Word. It should shake *us*, break *our* hard hearts, make *me* laid bare before the Word that's like a hammer that breaks rocks to pieces (Jer 23:29)

Every true believer knows some trembling – to have no fear of God would put us in the camp of Romans 3. Even unbelievers and the demons tremble at times before God's Word, but they turn away from it, whereas healthy fear of God leads us to Him. Trembling at God's Word begins at conversion and it's marked by healthy fear, faith and action, and continues through life. Those are some biblical examples, what about examples outside the Bible?

There was a famous man by the name of Junius who lived many centuries ago, and was an atheist. He wrote of his experiences one rainy day: "I came home to my house and saw a New Testament lying before me. I took it up, and there I met with that first chapter in John (which is a chapter that is as full of majesty as any), and I took the book and fell a reading: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' Upon reading this, my body **trembled**...I was struck with such horror and amazement that it shook every joint of me and my heart **trembled**..."⁸

Ruth Bell Graham tells the story of a Russian prostitute named Sonia and a murderer named Raskolnikoff with her, both had tormented consciences: 'On a rickety little table ... stands a tallow candle fixed in an improved candlestick of twisted metal. In the course of earnest conversation, Sonia glances at a book lying on a chest of drawers. Raskolnikoff takes it down. It is a New Testament. He hands it to Sonia and begs her to read it to him.

“Sonia opens the book: her hands **tremble**: the words stick in her throat. Twice she tries without being able to utter a syllable.” At length she succeeds. And then —“She closes the book: she seems afraid to raise her eyes on Raskolnikoff: her feverish **trembling** continues. The dying piece of candle dimly lights up this low-ceilinged room in which an assassin and a harlot have just read the Book of Books.” [like Isa 66:2 in contrite spirits, trembling at God’s Word] There is Raskolnikoff—most prodigal of prodigal sons— and there is Sonia—most prodigal of prodigal daughters—bending together over the living page that points all prodigals to the Father’s house.⁹

It was almost 200 years ago that Adoniram Judson baptized his first convert in Burma. His wife, Ann Hasseltine, described how one MOUNG NAU had responded to the Scripture: "A few days ago I was reading with him Christ's Sermon on the Mount. He was deeply impressed and unusually solemn. 'These words,' said he, 'take hold on my liver; they make me **tremble**.'"¹⁰

I can think of my own life how the truth of God’s Word made me tremble to realize I deserved the wrath of God. It was that fear that drove me to faith as a young teenager. As a Christian I can think of sermons that have moved me and one sermon that gave me what I can only describe as fear and trembling

Those are some ways Isa 66:2 can manifest in real life. For much of my life, though, and for most believers much of the time, that’s not always or often the experience of our life when we encounter Scripture. So we need to ask not just what trembling at God’s Word can look like in real life, we need to ask how we can cultivate it more in our life? How do we cultivate Isa 66:2?

#1. Pray for it

Pray Ps 119:38 *Establish Your word to Your servant as that which produces reverence for You* (NASB, or ‘that you may be feared’). Pray Ps 119:38 or Psalm 86:11 *Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name.* That’s a great prayer to pray as you open the Word of God, Ps 86:11, write it down, memorize it, verbalize it to God. Teach my divided heart Your truth, make my heart united to fear, to tremble

Psalm 34 uses the same Hebrew word as Isa 66:5 when it says in Ps 34:11 *‘Listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord...[it’s something we have to be taught as we listen to the Word and as we pray, as we cry out for help] The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears [same word as Isa 66:5, heeding, responding, He] is near to those who...have a contrite spirit* (v.17-18 NKJV)

God will never turn away the prayer of a contrite spirit. Pray for Isa 66:2.

[Chares Wesley prays it in a paraphrase] ... heav'n to earth come down [like v. 1]

Fix in us Thy humble dwelling [like His house in v. 1]; All Thy faithful mercies crown.

Jesus, Thou art all compassion, Pure, unbounded love Thou art;

Visit us with Thy salvation; Enter ev'ry **trembling** heart [like v. 2]¹¹

Prepare your heart to hear God's Word

You could study that more in the book of James. James says it this way:

'putting aside filthiness and all that remains of wickedness [i.e., repenting of sin] in humility receive the word ... But prove yourselves doers of the word and not merely hearers' (1:21-22 NASB). Effectual doers are blessed, v. 25.

The next chapter of James says even the demons believe in God and tremble ... if demons tremble at God's Word, how can we **not** tremble at His Word?

- beloved, as James says, if you don't receive God's Word in humility
- if you don't come to hear God's Word with a meek and lowly mindset
- if you listen to teaching for something to criticize, not be convicted by
- if your focus is what needs to be changed not *your need to be* changed
- if you come to church bent out of shape at someone, rather than come humbly bending your will before the word submitted to it shaping you
- if you worship troubled by sins of others but don't tremble at your sin
- if you hear the words of the communion warnings each month with no contrition or confession or don't apply them with your fellow Christian
- if you're more known for a complaining spirit than for a contrite spirit
- if you look down on others instead of looking for truths to uplift them
- God isn't looking to you in the way Isa 66:2 describes and you're not receiving His blessing for the humble, contrite, tremblers at His Word

The book *Gospel Fear*: 'And when you come to sermons to hear the Word of God, oh, labor to keep your hearts in a constant, trembling frame, and the Word that you now tremble at will forever hereafter comfort your heart.'¹²

Isa 66:5 calls us who tremble at the Word to hear it, to respond obeying it. The writer of Psalm 119 wrote '*I incline my heart to perform your statutes*' (v. 112) and then a few verses later he wrote '*My flesh trembles in fear of you; I stand in awe of your laws*' (v. 120 NIV). Always treat God's Word seriously as you hear it and read it. Be present and be reverent on Sunday mornings, Sunday nights, whenever you have opportunity to hear from God. Prepare your heart Sunday morning, Saturday night. If you apply this text this year, God will look to you with grace and growth. Re-read Isa 66:2, 5.

¹ 1647, re-published in 1991 by Soli Deo Gloria publications/Ligonier Ministries.

² Thomas Brooks, "To the Christian Reader," Preface to *Gospel Fear*.

³ *Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers*, opening prayer.

⁴ Burroughs, p. 11.

⁵ William Newell, "At Calvary."

⁶ Fanny Crosby, "Near the Cross."

⁷ Luther, "A Mighty Fortress," and Tomlin, "How Great is our God."

⁸ Burroughs, 14.

⁹ Quoted in "Prodigals and Those Who Love Them," 1991, Focus on the Family Publishing, p. 117-126

¹⁰ John Piper, "The Holy Spirit: Author of Scripture" (preached 2/26/84)

¹¹ Charles Wesley, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling."

¹² Burroughs, p. 24.