

The Fear of God

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Of all the things Scripture asks of us, perhaps none is more misunderstood than the fear of God. The phrase comes to our modern ears with a cold edge, as though the Lord expected us to approach Him trembling, looking over our shoulder, half expecting to be struck down. This is not at all what the Bible means, and it is not at all what the saints have taught us. The fear of God, in the Christian tradition, is the warmest and most grown-up posture a soul can take before its Creator. It is the reverence of a child who has come to understand, truly, how beloved he is — and who has also come to understand, truly, Whom he is speaking to when he speaks to God. It is a fear that makes us tender, not rigid. It is the beginning of wisdom, as Scripture says more than once, and it is the fountain out of which every other virtue of the servant's life quietly flows. In this lesson we will sit with the Lord's own words about holy fear, listen to the Fathers who discovered its sweetness, and find that what we feared about the fear of God was simply what the enemy wanted us to fear. The reality is gentler, richer, and more life-giving than any of us expected.

A Fear That Is Not Dread

Before we can learn what the fear of God is, we must quickly set aside what it is not. It is not the fear of a child before a harsh father. It is not the fear of a servant before a capricious master. It is not the fear of an accused man before a judge from whom he expects no mercy. Our tender God has been clearer with us about His heart than perhaps about any other subject. He does not want His children to come to Him afraid of Him.

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” (2 Timothy 1:7, NKJV)

And yet, in the same Scriptures, we are told over and over that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, the fountain of life, the secret of the Lord's friendship. The two things are not a contradiction. They are a gentle invitation into a distinction the Fathers loved — the distinction between slavish fear, which the Lord never asks of us, and filial fear, which He lovingly forms in us.

Slavish fear flees from God. Filial fear flees toward Him. Slavish fear asks, What will happen to me if I displease Him? Filial fear asks, How could I ever willingly grieve the heart of the One who loves me this much? The first is the posture of someone who has not yet understood the Gospel. The second is the posture of someone who has finally understood the Gospel all the way down.

St. John Chrysostom draws the line with his usual warmth:

“There is a fear that drives away, and there is a fear that draws near. The first belongs to the slave; the second belongs to the son. The one keeps us at a distance; the other

will not let us rest until we are in His arms.” — St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, XV

The fear of God, in its Christian meaning, is the fear that will not let us rest until we are in His arms. That is where we want to start.

The Beginning of Wisdom

Scripture is beautifully consistent about where wisdom starts. It does not start in our cleverness. It does not start in our education. It does not start in the effort of our own mind. It starts in a single, humbling posture, and every book of the Old Testament wisdom tradition repeats the same sentence almost verbatim:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (Proverbs 1:7, NKJV)

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” (Proverbs 9:10, NKJV)

The repetition is deliberate. The Holy Spirit is not being redundant; He is being patient with us. Every serious knowing of God begins in the same place — in the quiet, reverent, awakened awareness that the One we are trying to know is incomparably greater than we are, and that we are standing on holy ground whenever we open the Scriptures, whenever we approach the Cup, whenever we speak His name at all.

And the fruit of that reverence is not constriction. It is the opposite. It is life:

“The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death.” (Proverbs 14:27, NKJV)

A fountain. The image is tender and generative. A soul who has learned holy fear is not a soul who has shrunk; he is a soul who has been put in contact with the source of everything living. He has become permeable to God. He has stopped trying to impress the Almighty and has begun, at last, to be formed by Him.

St. Basil the Great, preaching to a congregation who had perhaps heard too many sermons confusing fear with dread, spoke of the two faces of holy fear with characteristic clarity:

“The fear of God has two effects. It keeps us from the evil we would have done without it, and it pushes us gently forward into the good we would have neglected. It is both the wall around the garden and the rain that waters it.” — St. Basil the Great, Homily on Psalm 33

Wall and rain. Protection and nourishment. The servant who has learned to live inside that fear is a servant who is safe and alive at the same time.

Three Postures Before the Same God

The Fathers of the desert noticed that souls tend to approach God from one of three postures over the course of a lifetime, and each posture carries its own kind of fear. The three are not competing; they are stages of growth. None of us is asked to skip them, and every one of us, with patience, can pass through them.

The first posture is the slave. The slave avoids sin because he is afraid of punishment. This is not a noble motivation, but it is a real one, and the Lord, in His kindness, does not despise it. Many of us first came back to confession because we were frightened. Many of us first stopped a sin because we were frightened. The Lord took our slave-fear and honored it. He did not shame us for starting there.

The second posture is the hireling. The hireling avoids sin because he is hoping for reward. Again, not a noble posture, but a real one, and the Lord again works with it. Many of us have prayed more faithfully because we hoped for a clear season, or gave more generously because we hoped for blessing. These are small, honest motives, and the Lord used them to move us forward.

The third posture, and the one holy fear finally produces in us, is the son. The son avoids sin because he cannot bear to grieve the Father who loves him. His fear is no longer about himself at all. It is about the Person whom he has come to know. This is the only fear that lasts, and it is the fear Scripture calls the beginning of wisdom.

St. Dorotheos of Gaza, whose fourth discourse on the fear of God has shaped every monastic generation since, draws the image precisely:

“At the beginning a man serves God from fear of hell; this is the fear of a slave. Afterward, he serves Him for the sake of reward; this is the fear of a hireling. But in the end, he serves Him out of love for the good itself; this is the fear of a son. And this is the fear the Lord calls blessed.” — St. Dorotheos of Gaza, Discourse IV, On the Fear of God

We should not be embarrassed about the posture we are currently in. Most of us are still somewhere between the hireling and the son, on a given Tuesday afternoon. The point is not to pretend we are already a son. The point is to keep walking toward the Father, and to let Him, in His patience, draw us up through each posture until at last the fear that remains is nothing but the tender, wordless reverence of a child in the presence of a beloved Parent.

Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

Some of us have read the Scriptures and noticed, with a small puzzle in the heart, that while the Old Testament seems to exalt the fear of God, the beloved disciple in the New Testament seems almost to contradict it:

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.” (1 John 4:18, NKJV)

The Fathers, who knew this verse as well as they knew the Proverbs, were never troubled by the supposed tension. St. John is simply drawing the final end of the road the Proverbs pointed toward. The fear that involves torment — the slavish fear, the dread, the anxious avoidance of a God felt as threat — that fear is swallowed up in love. It has to be. No one who has understood how loved he is by the Father can go on fearing Him in the slavish sense. It becomes impossible.

But filial fear — the reverence of the son, the tender awe of the child who stands in wonder before the goodness of his Father — that fear is not cast out by love. That fear is love's most mature expression. The one who loves most is the one who reveres most. The seraphim, who are closer to the Throne than any creature, are the ones who cover their faces and cry Holy without ceasing. Their awe is not the opposite of their love. It is the shape their love has taken now that they have seen the One they love.

St. Gregory of Nyssa puts the whole thing in a single sentence worth carrying:

“The fear that is cast out is the fear of the stranger. The fear that remains is the wonder of the friend. Love does not empty the soul of reverence; it fills the soul with the only reverence worth keeping.” — St. Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on the Beatitudes, VII

The more we come to love God, the more we revere Him. And the more we revere Him, the more tender our love becomes. The two do not cancel each other. They grow together, the way breath and song grow together in a human voice.

The Servant's Daily Safeguard

There is a practical pastoral reason the Church has always tended so carefully to the fear of God in the lives of her servants. The work of ministry places us repeatedly in situations where small compromises are possible and nobody would notice. A quiet exaggeration in a testimony, a shaded truth in a report to a committee, a personal preference dressed up as a theological conviction, a subtle unkindness in speaking of a fellow servant behind his back — none of these things will ever be reported in the parish bulletin. But all of them, untended, slowly hollow out a servant. The fear of God is the invisible guardrail that keeps them from happening.

“Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences.” (2 Corinthians 5:11, NKJV)

St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians about his own integrity as a minister of the Gospel, tucks the fear of God quietly into the middle of the sentence. He is not trying to manipulate them with it. He is simply confessing that he lives under the awareness of a God who sees all things, and that this awareness is the very reason his service has been, over long years, undimmed by the ordinary compromises he could have made. The fear of the Lord kept him honest where no one else would have known.

Later in the same letter, he gives the Corinthians a pastoral summary they could have hung in every Sunday school classroom:

“Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” (2 Corinthians 7:1, NKJV)

Holiness is perfected in the fear of God. Not by grit, not by willpower, not by clever technique, not by checklists — by the living, reverent, grateful awareness that the One who watches us loves us, and that we have no wish to grieve Him. That awareness, kept alive by prayer and by the sacraments, is enough to keep a servant straight through seasons in which he would not otherwise remain standing.

St. Isaac the Syrian, writing out of his long experience of both falling and being raised, left a sentence that any servant can paste inside the cover of his prayer book:

“The fear of God is the servant's invisible companion. When it is with him, he cannot lose his way. When he has silenced it, every path looks equally reasonable, and that is precisely when he is in the greatest danger.” — St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, LXVII

The invisible companion. He does not shout. He does not nag. He simply walks beside us, and his presence steadies our gait.

A Day Lived in the Light of That Fear

What does it actually look like, in the ordinary life of a servant, to walk in the fear of God? Not dramatic things. Not spectacular things. The fear of God, once received, expresses itself in the smallest corners of the day, and that is where the Holy Spirit prefers to do His deepest work.

It looks like slowing down before the icon in the morning because we remember Whose face we are standing before. It looks like a quiet pause before we answer an impatient message, because we know the Lord is listening to the words that come out of us. It looks like choosing the harder word with a beloved brother because we fear to speak a convenient lie to him more than we fear his reaction. It looks like a reverent silence in the presence of the Mysteries. It looks like our treatment of the poor, because we have remembered what the Lord said about the least of these. It looks like the prayer we say at the end of a day when we have not been at our best — a prayer offered not in terror but in the tenderness of a child who has come home.

The Lord's own mother gave us the purest picture of a life lived in holy fear in the Magnificat. She does not cringe. She does not grovel. She magnifies:

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant... For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation.” (Luke 1:46–50, NKJV)

His mercy is on those who fear Him. The two belong together. The more we receive His mercy, the more we fear Him; the more we fear Him, the more we receive His mercy. The Mother of God stands at the center of that beautiful circle, and she invites us to stand there with her.

May the Lord who is both Father and King teach us to revere Him as the Mother of God revered Him — with a love that bows, and a bowing that loves. May He form in us the fear that is the beginning of wisdom and the fountain of life, and may He let that fear be the quiet companion of every hour of our service. And may He, in His mercy, lead us from the fear of the slave, through the fear of the hireling, into the fear of the son — until at last the only thing we fear, anywhere in this world, is to grieve the heart of the One who has loved us with an everlasting love.

Review Questions

1. The Christian tradition distinguishes between slavish fear and filial fear. Where do we each recognize ourselves most — in the fear of the slave, the fear of the hireling, or the fear of the son — in this present season of our service? What would it look like to be drawn one step further into filial fear this year?
2. Scripture calls the fear of the Lord 'the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 9:10) and 'a fountain of life' (Proverbs 14:27). How does this reframing change the way we speak about the fear of God to those we serve — especially to children and young believers who may have inherited a caricature of it?
3. St. John writes, 'perfect love casts out fear' (1 John 4:18). How does the Fathers' distinction between the fear cast out and the fear that remains help us hold 1 John 4:18 together with Proverbs 9:10 without tension?
4. St. Paul says that holiness is 'perfected in the fear of God' (2 Corinthians 7:1). What are the small, invisible compromises of our own ministry that the fear of God would quietly prevent, and where do we sense the Lord asking us to raise the guardrail this month?
5. The Theotokos in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–50) gives us the clearest portrait of a life lived in holy fear. Which feature of her Magnificat — its lowliness, its magnification, its confidence in mercy — most corrects our own picture of the fear of God, and how can we bring that correction into tomorrow's prayer?

Books & References

Scripture: Proverbs 1:7; Proverbs 9:10; Proverbs 14:27; Ecclesiastes 12:13; 2 Timothy 1:7; 2 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 John 4:18; Luke 1:46–50; Psalm 34:11; Hebrews 12:28 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, especially Homily XV (on slavish vs. filial fear).
- St. Basil the Great, Homily on Psalm 33 (the two effects of holy fear).
- St. Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on the Beatitudes, VII (reverence as the shape of love).
- St. Dorotheos of Gaza, Discourses, IV (On the Fear of God).

- St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies (the fear of God as the servant's companion).
- St. John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent (on the ascent through fear to love).

All Scripture quotations in this lesson are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

Lesson Notes