

In “The Lion, the Witch and the wardrobe,” that wonderful children’s novel by the Christian author C.S. Lewis, some little ones come upon the lion Aslan for the first time. The sight of this glorious beast, a symbol of Christ, strikes terror in their hearts even if they fall in love with him.

“People...sometimes think,” Lewis comments on that moment, “that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time. If the children had ever thought so, they were cured of it now”. The good and terrible; something worthy of love and something worthy of fear. Can they be one and the same? Or are fear and love always mutually exclusive? More specifically, can we love God and fear God at the same time?

The familiar text from St. John’s first epistle comes immediately to mind: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

At the same time, however, the Scriptures in numerous other places commands us both to love God and to fear him. For example, Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Matt. 22:37), but He also warned severely: “Fear Him who, after the killing of the body, has the power to throw you into hell” (Lk. 12:5)

So we have a biblical dilemma: If perfect love casts out fear, how can we fulfil the commands both to love God perfectly and to fear him?

Why Fear God?

Few would deny that we should love God: His infinite goodness and His unfailing kindness towards us are worth of our grateful love. Why then would we fear him? What would it be about him that, even as He attracts us by the beauty of His character, also makes us

shrink back?

It is certainly true that we sometimes have false views of Gods, creating us in the groundless, unhealthy fear. “I knew you are a hard man”, said the servant to the master in Christ’ parable, and his misperception led him to bury his talent (see Matt. 25:24, 25). In a similar way, I’ve known Christians so terrified that God will condemn them for anything less than perfect that they’ve given up trying to live the Christian life altogether.

Even so, since we’re commanded to fear God, there must be something about him that genuinely calls for response of restraint: of shrinking back, of stopping short, of corralling our desires and our actions in accordance with what we know about Him. The Scriptures and ancient Christian writers identify several such divine traits:

1. We fear God’s superlative attributes as our Creator because we are mere creatures.

The first time I ever stood besides Niagara Falls, my heart pounded with fear just to be in such close proximity to something so big, so powerful that dwarfed me by comparison. Niagara, of course, is a little droplet in the hand of the One who set the galaxies spinning. So how much more should our hearts pound with fear in his presence?

Scriptural examples of this natural fear of God are plentiful. For example, when God spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, He challenged the frightened man with these sobering words: “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation... Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place? Do you send the lightning bolts on their way?” (Job 38:4, 12, 35).

Job’s reply provides us a useful lesson: “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for

me to know...Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (42:3, 6). Like Job, we must learn that this kind of fear of God- a natural fear of the Creator by the creature- is healthy for us because it humbles us. It reminds us who we are. No wonder then that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). It teaches us who God truly is and who we truly are.

2. We fear God’s utter holiness because we are sinful.

Sin is a disorder in our souls – a stain, rust, a scratch in the substance of who we are. When we come in to the presence of a God who is wholly without such disorder, such corruption we find the encounter jarring, even painful.

Why? Because when holiness meets sin, it “burns”; our God is a “consuming fire” (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). When he encounter Him, His order begins rearranging and correcting our disorder. His purity begins bleaching out stain. His wholeness begins rubbing against our rust and scratches, to make “the rough ways smooth” (Luke 3:5).

We fear God because His very presence provokes in us a discomfort. As it was for Isaiah in the Temple, when we stand before a God who is “Holy, Holy, Holy” our sinfulness makes us cry out, “Woe to me!” (See Isa. 6:1-5). But once again, the fear is healthy; it’s a sign that we’ve encountered the source of our healing, and the flaming coals of God’s righteousness can burn us clean.

3. We fear God's justice because we deserve punishment and need chastisement.

When we first learn the truth that there is a just God who “comes to judge the earth” (Ps. 98:9), we fear Him, for we know we’re guilty. We rightly have “a fearful expectation of judgment and a raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (Heb. 10:27). Such was the fear that prompted three thousand listeners to be baptized after St. Peter’s Pentecost sermon, which ended with a warning of judgment (See Acts 2:14-41). It can also be healthy if it spurs sinners to repent and seek forgiveness. This kind of fear, then, like the others, is our ally. “Through the fear of the Lord a man avoids evil” (Prov. 16:6); it’s a fence to keep us from trespassing.

Fear and Love

In all these ways, the fear of God is obviously a great return to our original question: How is the fear compatible for the love of God, and how does the love “cast out fear?”

First, we must recognize in the course of obeying God as a result of fear, we come to know him more deeply: Jesus promised that if we obey His commands, He would show Himself to us (see John 14:21). As we imitate God’s ways, we ourselves become more like Him, to understand and appreciate Him more.

Once we know God more intimately, we discover all those things in Him that are so desirable, so attractive – the things for which we, like King David, pant and thirst (see Ps. 42:1,2). Our soul reaches out to the goodness of the Lord, a compelling Beauty (see Ps. 27:4) that draws us to Him in love. In time, that love grows until it overwhelms the fear.

Meanwhile, the more that the fear of God teaches us about ourselves - the more we know our limitations, our sinfulness and the fate we deserve- the more we come to love God for His surpassing mercy and grace. The more holy we become through obedience, the less terrifying His Holiness becomes; instead, it appears more attractive to us, more “loveable”. Finally, the more we

obey, the less we need fear the chastisement of God’s justice; this is the specific kind of fear St. John writes about, the fear that “has to do with punishment”, which is “cast out by love”. If perfect love casts out fear, how can we fulfil the commands both of love God perfectly and to fear Him?

St. Augustine summed it up in this way: A needle pierces cloth but brings the thread behind it, and when the needle is gone, the thread is left behind. Thus the needle makes room for the thread. Fear of God is a needle, he concluded, and love of God is a thread. The fear pierces the heart painfully, but it makes a place for the love, and when the fear has gone, the love remains.

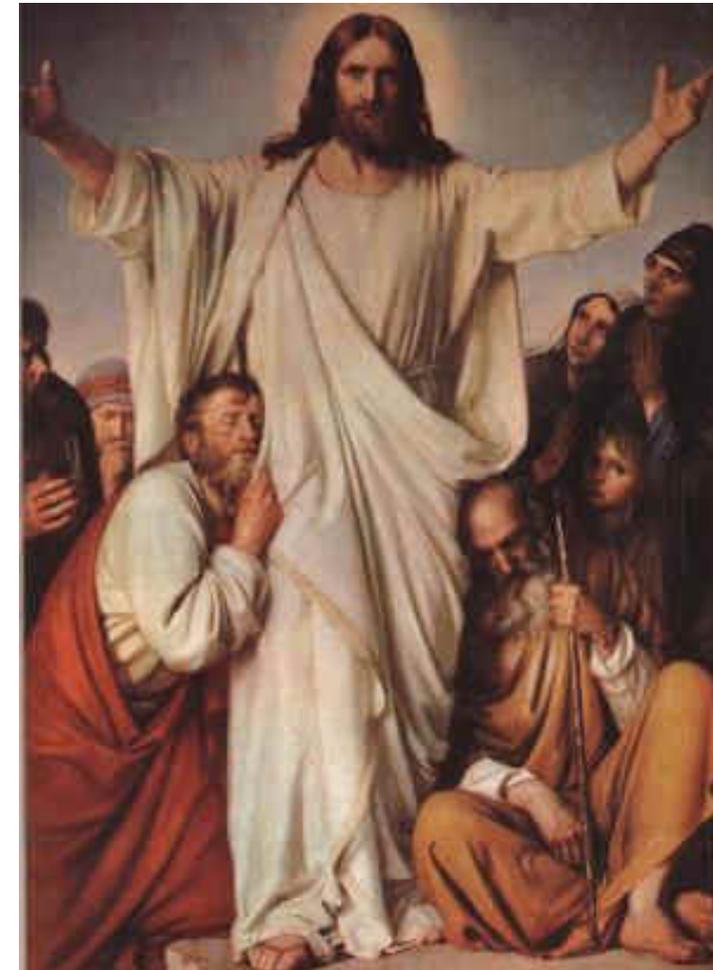
From Chill to Thrill

Does any kind of fear of God stay in our hearts? Certainly in the ebb and flow of our earthly progress in the spiritual life, before we reach perfection in heaven, we live from day to day in the varying mix of fear and love towards God. Yet even in eternity, I, convinced, we’ll never become so familiar with God that we totally lose that “primal” fear of creature before the Creator, that natural and fitting awe in response to his awesomeness. That particular fear, however, will come to be joined to our love in such a way that the love will actually be transformed by it.



Love God or Fear Him?

Can We Really Do Both at the Same Time?



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