
Fear of the Lord

BY RUSSELL RENO

Fear of the Lord is not only the beginning of wisdom. According to Scripture, fear of God is also the end as part of the consummating gift of salvation. What kind of fear leads to wholeness, love, and freedom from self-indulgence, rather than groveling servitude?

The binding of Isaac in Genesis 22 is one of the most memorable passages in Scripture. God comes to the aging patriarch Abraham and commands him to offer his only son as a sacrifice. In verses of chilling concision, the story is told. Abraham cuts the wood for the burnt offering. He loads his donkey, and begins the journey. From the base of the mountain, the innocent young son unknowingly carries the wood for the fire of his own sacrifice. They reach the appointed place, and the father coolly and efficiently prepares his son to be slain. The sharp-edged knife in hand, Abraham stands ready to draw it across the neck of the child whom he loves. It is a shocking tableau: a father about to kill his beloved son in obedience to God's command.

Of course, readers of Scripture know that Abraham does not end up sacrificing Isaac. An angel of the Lord appears to him and commands him to stop, and immediately a ram appears who serves as a substitute offered in Isaac's place. Nonetheless, biblical readers have long struggled with the episode. The dark possibilities of child sacrifice—and the terrible prospect of a god who would command such things—haunt the scene. And for the modern reader, the explanation that the angel of the Lord gives for the counter-command to spare Isaac only compounds and deepens the ambivalence. "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him," Abraham is told, "for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son" (Genesis 22:12).

Fear! The emotion hardly seems commendable. "Fear," observes Aristotle, "is caused by whatever we feel has great power of destroying us, or of harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain."¹ If this is so, then in what sense can fear be part of the life of faith, the purpose of which is to draw us close to the great power of God who saves rather than harms us? Are we to think that God favors Abraham because he grovels and trembles in slavish obedience, even to the point of sacrificing his son? Isn't Abraham's disposition of fear as barbaric as the nearly completed ritual of child sacrifice? The Old Testament endorsement of fear, we can easily conclude, is an example of a primitive form of piety, one shaped by ancient Israelite images of a warrior deity who compels obedience with threatening displays of power. Thank goodness, we may continue, it is transcended by the more advanced, more spiritual, and more humane religion of the New Testament. After all, is it not written that "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18)?

Superficially attractive and unfortunately all too common, this functionally Marcionite view of God in the scriptural witness cannot be the way forward. Scripture itself warns against the idea that fear is an early stage in religious development, one to be transcended by a supposedly more mature, more intimate, more positive vision. The Psalmist proclaims, "The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever" (Psalm 19:9). Moreover, the eschatological prophecies of Isaiah tell us that fear plays a central role in the coming day of divine glory: "Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged" (Isaiah 60:5, KJV). Fear of the Lord is not only the beginning of wisdom. According to Scripture, fear of God is also the end as part of the consummating gift of salvation.

THE LIMITS OF WORLDLY FEAR

Scripture interprets Scripture, and as we turn to the Bible we can find some implicit distinctions that illuminate how the covenant begun with Abraham and fulfilled in Christ both casts out and encourages fear. In the first place, Scripture gives plenty of ink to depicting a worldly fear that diminishes human life. Cain has sown the blood of Abel, and he shrinks from the consequences of his sin. In a world ruled by sin and death, we seem doomed to fear our fellow man. But sometimes it is not a matter of sin. Faced with the infertility of his wife, the Lord appears to Abraham and reassures him, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield" (Genesis 15:1). The ways in which the worldly reality of fertility complicates life also open the Gospel stories. Joseph confronts his pregnant spouse, and he tries to find the most just and humane way to extract himself from the shameful circumstances of her apparent adultery. An angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream, counseling, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20). Abraham fears the fickle nature of human reproduction, while Joseph fears the way in which

sexual desire can draw us into the destroying power of sin. In both cases, the two men fear being destroyed by the finite powers of the world, the biological “facts of life,” that are indifferent toward the flourishing of human beings. This is the essence of worldly fear: a shrinking anxiety about the future based on a realistic calculation of how things usually work out.

We find that Scripture allows that worldly fear plays a legitimate role in worldly affairs. Wisdom urges prudence and discretion (Proverbs 8:12). We should not imprudently fling ourselves into danger, and we need to weigh our actions and decisions according to realistic calculations about likely outcomes. Moreover, if we are in positions of responsibility, prudence counsels a judicious use of fear to motivate others. The Apostle Paul endorses the fear-inducing power of governing authorities. After all, he observes, “rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad” (Romans 13:3). The ruler bears the sword with God’s approval, because the common good is well served when the wicked shrink from doing wicked deeds out of fear of punishment. The same use of fear holds for less dramatic uses of public power. Paul tells the church in Thessalonica, “If anyone will not work, neither let him eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10, NASB).² Fear of hunger and want motivates, and a wise leader uses that fear to encourage socially cooperative and productive behavior.

Yet, this practical and political endorsement of fear occurs infrequently in Scripture, and it is set against a much larger background of counsel against allowing worldly fear to gain spiritual control. The Bible consistently recognizes that worldly fear can easily come to predominate over our spiritual lives. When it does, fear debilitates, paralyzes, and undermines our faithfulness. For example, the Israelites calculate the might of Pharaoh’s

chariots in comparison to their defenseless columns, crying out to Moses that it is better to serve in Egypt than to die in the wilderness. Their judgment is justified in the eyes of the world, but Moses reprimands them. They have falsely assumed that worldly powers rule the world. Against this slavery to worldly fear, Moses

urges, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today” (Exodus 14:13). The same holds for Abraham’s fear of infertility and Joseph’s fear of the shame of sin. God rules the world, and we must believe in the power of his outstretched arm. Such a faith frees us from worldly fear. As the Psalmist sings, “Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear” (Psalm 27:3, NASB).

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In his reflections on the social destiny of humanity, Saint Augustine treats our usual fears of worldly power in a similar way. He observes, following the Apostle Paul, that the fear-inspiring power of the earthly sword has a proper purpose. Human sinfulness can be restrained by worldly fear, and the wise ruler of the earthly city should acknowledge and try to manage our fears of want, slavery, and death. Yet, however prudent and necessary, social life ordered by worldly fear is as much a spiritual dead-end as an individual life organized around worldly loyalties and loves. The earthly city, Augustine writes, is forever “shaken by these emotions as by diseases and upheavals.” A fear of suffering and death can be all too easily conscripted into the plan of demagogues and tyrants. And even if wisely manipulated, the kind of justice that emerges out of trembling anxiety is outward and unstable. For this reason, Augustine concludes that worldly fear has no role to play in the heavenly city of peace. The faithful are united by the power of a common love of God.³

THE NATURE OF SPIRITUAL FEAR

If worldly fear has no lasting role, then what are the other forms of fear that the Bible endorses? Generally, Scripture commends forms of fear that stem from a realistic assessment of God’s righteousness. “Do not be afraid,” Moses tells the Israelites at Sinai, “for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin” (Exodus 20:20). The exhortation seems paradoxical: do not fear so that you might fear. But the paradox is apparent, not real. The first fear is worldly. The Israelites want to anxiously retreat from the holiness of God and go back to the less demanding idols of this world. They would rather fear famine and the sword than the judgments of God. But Moses wants the Israelites to reckon with reality. There is no place of refuge. God will put all hearts to the test. If we keep our eyes on this fact, Moses seems to be saying, we will not find ourselves so easily falling into sin. Fear the Lord’s power of judgment, Moses is saying, so that you will not fear the world and do its bidding.

Modern theologians often worry that fear of eternal punishment somehow corrupts a true faith, as if the mere thought of divine judgment casts doubt on God’s mercy. Others suggest that a faith motivated by fear of punishment simply reflects a cowering, anxious hedonism that organizes commitments according to long-term calculations about pleasure and pain. But these simple-minded views confuse worldly fear with spiritual fear. Consider an analogy from the intellectual life. Fear of ignorance or error can be colored by shame and anxiety, but this emotion does not work at cross-purposes to an animating love of truth. The same holds for fear of divine punishment. Sinners should recoil from the idea of a righteous judge capable of knowing and punishing all transgressions, and this fear is no more inconsistent with a love of God than fear of error contradicts a love of truth.

We need to be awakened to this spiritual fear of God's judgment. The Bible as a whole and the New Testament in particular encourages us to grieve and weep over our sins (see Matthew 26:75). If we tremble before the thought of final judgment (see Mark 13:32-37), we can better avoid transgression. In this way, a fear of divine punishment is pedagogical. It directs us away from sin and toward righteousness. It guides us, says Augustine, "to lead the right kind of life, the life that is according to God's will."⁴ This guiding fear, however, must come to an end after the faithful enter their reward, for they have attained righteousness and no longer need the pedagogical fear of punishment.

However, if fear of the Lord is everlasting, then it must be of a different order and possess a different character. What kind of fear has a role to play in the perfection of the elect? What role can fear play in the gift of fellowship with God? How does fear enlarge the heart?

Augustine recognizes that a lasting, heavenly fear of God is something of a paradox. To find a way forward he calls it a "serene fear," because it shares in the "tranquility based on love" that, as Paul teaches, "never ends" (see 1 Corinthians 13:8).⁵ Whether or not Augustine is right to think of the everlasting fear as serene, the Bible as a whole supports the apparently odd conjunction of eschatological fulfillment with a shrinking, reverential fear. The culminating scene of the book of Job is a good example. God answers out of the whirlwind, and the thundering declarations of divine majesty are not meant to induce Job to follow the path of righteous. They reveal the transcendent power of God. Job's response: a shrinking, repentant awe in the presence of God.

If we set aside facile pictures of cherubic angels in a heaven filled with dainty nimbus clouds, it is not difficult to see why the promise of fellowship with God instills an existential horror. How can we draw near to God, even to the point of partaking in the divine nature, without dying to our sinful selves? Here

the fear is less concerned with punishment and more concerned with purification. In his modest divine comedy, *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis portrays this fear with his usual insight. The spectral souls who are met by the Solid People at the entrance to heaven can only journey toward God if they give up their doubts, vices, and shame. In Lewis' account few have the courage to endure the spiritual fear of purification. The reason is simple: as sinners,

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they cannot imagine being themselves without the deforming qualities that alienate them from God. In a particularly vivid scene, Lewis portrays a hissing lizard of lust warning a frightened soul. “Without me,” asks the lizard, “how could you live?” Sin must be destroyed in order for us to enter the heavenly kingdom. This should be good news, but we are so fully invested in our sinful habits that we see ourselves – our plans, our projects, our personalities – consumed as well. The frightened soul turns to his guardian angel for reassurance. God promises new life, he is told, but there is no promise that the transition from sin to holiness will be painless.⁶

What must be given up can seem so dear to us – and its promised restoration can seem so remote and illusory – that we tremble on the edges of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience, often paradoxically fearing the courage to obey even as we seek divine assistance. Augustine vividly portrays this fear in his *Confessions*. After he had read the Platonists, he reports that his intellectual objections had fallen away. He was disposed to believe in Christ, but he could not, because he feared the narrowness of the way. He wanted to be rid of the binding chains of his sin, but as he tells us, his desire for new life in Christ was accompanied by a paralyzing anxiety that he could not endure a moral change of such magnitude. The closer Augustine gets to his goal, the more he fears attaining it. He sees the gulf between his sin and God’s invitation to holiness, and he fears falling into the abyss.

This fear is everlasting. God’s invitation to holiness is an offer of fellowship. Grace brings us into the divine life. Yet the gulf between our lives and the life of the Holy Trinity is not just moral; it is ontological. He is creator and we are creatures. The created nature of the human person remains forever distinct from the divine nature of the Holy Trinity. This chasm is bridged by grace, but never eliminated. God becomes incarnate, not created, and salvation is a deification of our humanity, not our absorption into the divine nature.

The eternal and unfathomable difference between God and creature explains the everlasting fear that is consistent with a love that draws us ever nearer. An analogy might help. When we walk across bridges we may enjoy every confidence that the engineers have done a good job and the span will not collapse – and yet, who does not feel hints of terror when looking over the edge and into the depths of the chasm below. This is all the more true of our salvation in Christ. He is our trustworthy mediator, our bridge to eternal life in God, and our confident faith in his saving death is entirely consistent with a fearful sense of the depths into which he went on our behalf, depths from which we turn away in shuddering, instinctive horror. Hans Urs von Balthasar observes, “Fear is not abolished, nor is distance eliminated, when grace is given to nature, but it shows up now in its authentic form in Gethsemane and on the Cross and is transfigured as a

'holy fear of the Lord' lasting into eternity."⁷ The nothingness of death endured by Christ can never be fathomed—and we rightly fear to look into its gaping, hungry void. As the old spiritual says of the cross, "it causes me to tremble, tremble."

FEAR AND OBEDIENCE

Both the pedagogical fear of divine judgment and eschatological fear and awe invoked by what God has endured for our sakes operate in Abraham's trial. Abraham does not rely on cheap grace. He does not presume upon the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience, as if he could evade God's commandments and then throw himself on the mercy of God. Instead, Abraham has a proper awareness that none shall escape the judgment of God, and he acts accordingly, wishing not to store up wrath for himself (see Romans 2:1-11). Abraham fears the Lord in the way that Moses urges upon the Israelites, and because he fears, he can be trusted to obey. But there is also the further, reverential sense of fear revealed in the trial of Abraham. If we look to Deuteronomy we can see how this is so. There, Moses shifts the relationship between fear and obedience. One does not so much fear in order to obey as obey in order to fear: "diligently observe all the words of this law that are written in this book," we read, "fearing this glorious and awful name, the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 28:58). Abraham's obedience brings him closer to God, and this intimacy with the divine produces a reverential, awe-filled fear.

Thus, we can say that Abraham's fear crowns as well as motivates his obedience. When the angel of the Lord says to Abraham, "now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me," it is as if the Lord is sizing up Abraham. "I remember your contentious personality when we stood overlooking Sodom and Gomorrah," we might imagine God saying, "and I see how your humble fear of my majesty has kept you silent and you did not dispute my commandment." We can imagine God continuing, "And I remember how you pled on behalf of Ishmael, yet now in your reverence for my purposes you have not petitioned on behalf of Isaac." And still further, keeping in mind God's foreknowledge of all that will come to pass, is it not difficult to imagine the Lord saying to Abraham, "I see that fear of God has so overtaken your soul that you no longer think of yourself, and unlike Jephthah who will sacrifice his child (Judges 11:29-40), you do not give yourself over to self-regarding grief and

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lamentation.” Thus does the Lord admire Abraham, whom he had chosen and tried for his purposes. With satisfaction God says to Abraham, “You are now a man who knows how to walk humbly with his God.” Then, quoting from his own wisdom, the Lord concludes his address to Abraham. “It is written,” God says, “that ‘the reward for humility is the fear of God’” (Proverbs 22:3), and thus do I give you what you have earned.”

NOTES

1 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Book II, chapter 5 (1382a 28-29), in *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 1389.

2 Scripture quotations marked NASB are from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

3 Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIV, chapter 9.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1946), chapter 11.

7 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, translated by Edward Oakes (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1992), 287.



RUSSELL RENO

is Professor of Theological Ethics at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska.