

August 2018

## The Fear of the Lord in the Shadow of the Cross



*“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you... (1 Peter 4:12, NIV)*

Fiery ordeals are a regular part of life. We struggle against trials and temptations such as lust, idolatry, fear, anxiety, and depression on a daily basis while some of us may encounter the horrors of sickness, tragedy, loss, heartbreak, and injustice. Regardless of the degree or nature of our fiery ordeals, our tendency is to fear those things. We avoid them, we lose sleep over them, and more often than not, we allow them to consume our every thought.

It is from this place of fear that we often turn to the Bible. **With a heart that feared man and the world, I so often reached for the Bible not as the holy and infallible Word of God, but as a remedy for my fear.** One of the biggest oversights that I have seen in my own Christian walk is the omission and misinterpretation of what it means to fear of the Lord and how that kind of fear forms a vital piece of our foundation as Bible-believing Christians.

### Who Do We Fear?

*“But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.” (Jeremiah 17:7-8, NIV)*

Let's consider the story in Mark 4:35-41 where Jesus calms the storm. When we read about this miracle and the many like it throughout the Bible, we tend to insert our own personal 'storm' into that particular scenario. The violent waves that threatened to vanquish the disciples are often interpreted to be the fiery ordeals that threaten our lives – the tragedy of cancer, the heartbreak of a lost relationship, the loss of a job, or the injustice of abuse and neglect. We are encouraged through this Biblical account to not make the same mistakes as the disciples did but to instead trust that Jesus will calm the storm; that he will cure the cancer, restore the relationship, provide an even better job, or impose His rightful justice on those who inflict harm on the innocent and helpless.

Rather than a right and reverent fear of the Lord, it is our daily circumstances that we use as an elusive reference point for our Biblical interpretation, understanding, and wisdom, which is then easily corruptible by emotion and sentiment. We therefore tailor God's promises and miracles according to our present circumstances, inadvertently missing the grander purpose of the story. This interpretation that God will 'calm our storms' may be applicable, but it is not exactly foundational. Rather, this interpretation places a subtle emphasis on our fear of man and circumstances, subsequently identifying God as a simple *remedy* for such fear rather than the ultimate *object* of our fear. This then makes Him out to be only slightly larger and more powerful than the fear that we face. It places God's power to save in relation to our fear rather than submitting our fear to the one and only powerful and holy God, thus shrinking God down to be nothing more than a modern day Hercules.

How do we break this pattern of thinking?

We must first come to realize that the entirety of the Bible and the mission, person, and office of Jesus Christ here on earth points to a greater, more eternal reality than the harsh realities that we face on a daily basis. While it is easier and certainly more manageable to associate our daily battles with the storm in Mark chapter four, it is important that we pull back and realize that the storm in this story and the many stories like it points to a greater, far worse 'Storm' that we all inevitably face as a fallen and broken people.

## The Wrath of God

***"If only we knew the power of your anger! Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due."***  
***(Psalm 90:11, NIV)***

Throughout the Bible, the sea often serves as a representation of God's wrath. This is evident in both the Old and New Testament. We see this representation very clearly in the story of Jonah (Jonah 1:15-17, NIV) as he plunges himself into the raging sea to calm the storm. He is swallowed and remains in the belly

of the whale for three days and three nights until being spit back up onto dry land. The entirety of this story points to the greater sacrifice and coming glory of Jesus Christ. Just as Jonah plunged himself into the depths of the sea to calm the storm, so too did Jesus plunge himself into the depths of sin to satisfy God's wrath. Just as Jonah was spit back up onto dry land three days later, so too was Jesus resurrected from the grave three days after being buried.

Even in the book of Revelation there are a number of references made to the wrath of God being like the sea (Rev. 18:21, 21:1, NIV). Babylon, which represents the seat of all idolatry and the enemy of Christianity, will be cast into God's wrath as a boulder would be cast into the sea, never to be seen again and with the coming of a new heaven and a new earth, the wrath of God will be no more as His justice will have been satisfied in and through Jesus Christ, thus bringing to completion the original covenant made with God's chosen people (Gen. 17:7-8, Rev. 21:3, NIV).

We can therefore delineate that Mark 4:35-41 is not necessarily a display of Jesus' power or will to save us from our daily fiery ordeals, but rather that this story and the many stories like it is pointing to a much greater salvation that Jesus provides – salvation from the wrath of God.

The disciples rightly expressed a deep, unnerving fear of the sea. They were afraid of the unstoppable power that this storm possessed and were even more afraid of being consumed by its waves. In similar fashion, humanity throughout the Old Testament expressed the same kind of trembling before the presence of God Almighty. One such example of this can be found in 2 Samuel 6:1-7. After being commanded by God to not touch the holy things secured in the Ark of the Covenant, we read about a moment where the Ark of the Covenant begins to topple over the edge of an unstable cart and in what we would consider an act of valor, the Israelite named Uzzah reaches out to steady this precious relic. In response, *the Lord's anger burned against [him] because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God. (2 Samuel 6:7, NIV)*

Even our best intentions are infested with sin and insolence towards God. As Isaiah 64:6 says – *all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags*. Jerry Bridges explains this concept beautifully as he considers how 'even our tears of repentance need to be washed in the blood of the Lamb.' Even on our best days, we are helpless against the vast and just wrath of God. In front of the Holy of holies, the Great I Am, and the Creator of heaven and earth, sin cannot stand. In its entirety, sin must be destroyed. David understood the necessity for this kind of fear of the Lord as he penned Psalm 90. He knew how essential a right fear of the Lord was to the foundation of his faith. He knew that the entirety of who he was – good and bad – could not bear under the holiness of who God is, and therefore he *knew* this fear; this appropriate and right fear of the Lord and His holiness and righteousness. It is only when we have a knowledge of the magnificence of God's holiness and perfection

that we recognize the depth of our own depravity, causing us to tremble at His Word. And it is in that moment as we stand trembling before the transcendent God that our hearts are humbled and prepared to behold the glory of Jesus Christ.

## The Shadow of the Cross

*...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (Romans 3:23-24, NIV)*

Imagine that you are on some country road all by yourself. There are no other cars around and no indication of civilization anywhere to be seen across the acres of one corn field after the other. The only thing that disrupts your endless view of the horizon is this ominous, terrifying F-5 tornado. Your car radio blares with emergency warnings, instructing all who are in this tornado's path to find shelter immediately. You realize that you are in the direct path of this tornado, but even more alarming is the realization that you have nowhere to go. You are in fact helpless.

That's when, out of the corner of your eye, you notice someone waving their arms, trying to get your attention. They seemed to have shown up out of nowhere but are now motioning for you to follow them into what appears to be a bunker; an underground refuge. So you follow in faith that this bunker will protect you and suddenly find yourself out of harm's way. From the refuge of this bunker you are now able to see this F-5 tornado for what it really is – a magnificent, overwhelming, unnerving natural phenomenon that possesses unspeakable power. Without fearing your own demise, you are able to take in the full magnitude; the awe-inspiring massiveness and greatness of this F-5 tornado. And not only do you observe with fear and trembling as the tornado passes by, but you also experience a reverence and an awe-inspired gratitude for the bunker that protected you from such inescapable annihilation.

The disciples had an experience similar to this as the storm raged around them. They experienced a fear for their own lives. They knew that they were helpless against the unstoppable power of the storm and therefore feared that they would be lost to the violence of the waves. What is interesting about this first-hand account of Jesus' miraculous power is that Mark mentions the terror expressed by the disciples only *after* Jesus calms the storm. Of course, their cries – *"Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"* – imply fear, but it is only in verse 41 after Jesus rebukes the storm and tells it to be still that Mark actually notes the terror of the disciples.

Likewise, there is a certain fear that we get to experience in the shadow of Jesus' power to save unlike the fear expressed by Old Testament believers. Just as the disciples trembled at the power that Jesus demonstrated in calming the sea, so too do we tremble at the power displayed by Jesus on the cross as

he satisfied the wrath of God against all sin. Our trembling at the cross however can never be fully known or truly expressed until we first recognize what exactly it is that the cross continuously saves us from.

## The Fear of the Lord

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (Proverbs 9:10, NIV)*

Pastor J.D. Greear describes the fear of the Lord as ‘a recognition of the size of God.’ Aside from a real trembling before the Lord in right, reverent fear of Him, we will never, as Proverbs 9:10 assures, attain a true wisdom and understanding of God. When our view of God grows too small, we do not fear His sovereignty. When our faith and trust in Him becomes too manageable, we begin trusting in ourselves rather than His omnipotence. When He is diminished to a mere being that is only slightly greater and wiser than ourselves, we become arrogant and lofty in our thinking; becoming wise in our own eyes rather than dependent on His omniscience. How does this happen? Consider the words of Grace Thornton in her book, I Don’t Wait Anymore: *“If we don’t realize how big the Kingdom on the horizon is, we risk seeing God as really small here. And if the Light on the horizon isn’t so bright that it’s nearly tangible, the small here can become really big.”*

When we reach for the Word of God as a remedy against our fear of this world, God only becomes slightly larger than our fears or problems. He is diminished to be only wise enough, powerful enough, and sufficient enough to ease our fears, and that’s it.

Think about the massive F-5 tornado that you encountered on the desolate country road for a moment. What would the bunker have meant to you apart from the presence of that F-5 tornado? Nothing. It would have been a simple bunker with no real or necessary power to save. Without an acknowledgment of God’s wrath and an assent to our own helplessness in light of His justice, the cross of Jesus Christ would bear no real necessity or power to save.

The unstoppable and overwhelming, indisputable justice of God serves as an agent that prepares our hearts to deeply treasure the saving grace of Jesus Christ. This right understanding and fear of God’s wrath is necessary for us to recognize our deep-rooted depravity, which then elicits in our hearts a true and appropriate reverence and awe for the saving grace of Jesus Christ which stands between God’s wrath and our immorality. We tremble before the cross only when we recognize what the cross actually defends us from and then assent to the fact that we could not and cannot defend ourselves. When we recognize that the entirety of who we are as sinful human beings cannot bear under the weight of God’s holiness, we start down the path of wisdom; understanding the extent to which we need the cross. This prepares us to approach the cross of Jesus Christ with a humble and contrite spirit; trembling at the glory

of His sacrifice and standing terrified at His power to save. A deficiency in understanding the magnitude and severity of the Storm that is God's wrath and justice results in a minimized and diluted sense of Jesus' love, grace, and power to save us from that Storm. When we lose sight of the greater problem that we inherently face as a fallen and broken people, we naturally become preoccupied with the 'light and momentary troubles' (2 Cor. 4:17, NIV) of this world rather than remaining eternally fixated on 'God's glory displayed in the face of Christ' (2 Cor. 4:6, NIV). A fear of man is derived when we forget to look beyond the cross into the 'consuming fire' that is the one and only sovereign and holy God Almighty. **The beauty of the cross diminishes only when the reality of God's wrath becomes inconsequential in our hearts and minds.** When we rightly understand what it is that Jesus saves us from and firmly place our faith and confidence in the love and mercy of Christ, only then are we able to witness the magnificence and fullness of God's righteous and holy power; bearing a right, reverent fear of the Lord from the security we have in the shadow of the cross.

*Teach me your way Lord, that I may rely on your faithfulness; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name. I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever. For great is your love toward me; you have delivered me from the depths, from the realm of the dead.*

*(Psalm 86:11-13, NIV)*