Section: Doctrine of God

**TEACHING NOTES**

**Q17. What does it mean to fear God?**

A: For the saved, fearing God is not a fear of His wrath; rather, it is an awe—a reverence—for the holiness and majesty of God. It is also a humbleness and reasonable trembling towards God’s seriousness and power.

The fear of God is a wonderful thing! The fear of God is a blessing! The fear of God is a gift! The fear of God is something that we should be thankful for, not only thankful to have it, but thankful that it exists.

Look with me at just a few of the benefits of the fear of the Lord.

**Proverbs 14:27** The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life,

that one may turn away from the snares of death.

**Proverbs 10:27** The fear of the Lord prolongs life,

 but the years of the wicked will be short.

**Proverbs 22:4** The reward for humility and fear of the Lord

is riches and honor and life.

The time it takes me to prepare the lessons I get to teach is always such a blessing to me. This one in particular has truly been exceptionally good for my soul. I stand here tonight with a much greater sense of the weight that comes with the responsibility we have to God and His word.

I pray that our time in God’s word tonight would leave you longing for a greater fear of God, not that we would dread God but that we would truly tremble due to a deeper awe and reverence of the holiness of God.

Let’s pray for that now.

Question and answer #17 of our WOTC reads: **What does it mean to fear God?** For the saved, fearing God is not a fear of His wrath, rather it is an awe- a reverence- for the holiness and majesty of God. It is also a humbleness and reasonable trembling towards God’s seriousness and power.

The purpose for our study, the reason we come to sit under the teaching of God’s word each week is not primarily to learn more about God’s word for the sake of mere head knowledge. Simply *knowing* what the Bible means and understanding the teachings of scripture are not the end goal of our efforts, they are a means to a greater end. That greater end is to know God- not just know about Him, but know Him intimately. We considered the difference between knowing God and knowing about God when I taught several weeks ago on question #4 – “How Can We Know About God?”

The point I want to make is that I really want for us to apply this truth to our own hearts tonight. This is God’s command on us the of the Apostle James, as we saw in **James 1:22:** … be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

I certainly don’t mean to wreck the fun, happy mood you may have come in with tonight, but I do want us to shift our focus for awhile as we give thought to what it means for us to fear God rightly. Laughter is a good gift from God that is meant to be enjoyed to the glory of God, but even our laughter needs to be governed by a fear of the Lord if it is to be enjoyed to its fullest.

FOR THE SAVED

Our answer defines the fear of God only in regards to the saved. Why is that? The primary reason is that the catechism aims to inform us biblically and instruct us for righteous living, by grace through faith. So, it speaks to what Christian fear of God is. But also, as we look to God’s word tonight to better understand what He means by the fear of God, you will quickly begin to see that the unsaved do not fear God as His word instructs.

Theologian John Gill says, the fear of God (Christian fear of God) “is not meant a fear of God's wrath, of hell and damnation; nor a fearful distrust of his presence, power, providence, and grace; much less an hypocritical fear; but a reverential affection for God, and which is peculiar to the children of God, which springs from a sense of divine goodness, is attended with holiness of heart and life, is consistent with faith, even full assurance of it, and with spiritual joy in its highest degree; it stands opposed to pride and haughtiness, and is a blessing of the covenant of grace: now this is not to be found in unregenerate men, for this springs from grace, and not nature, and is only implanted in the heart in conversion; it appears from the whole life and conversation of unconverted men, that the fear of God is not in their hearts, nor before their eyes.”

Those who aren’t saved **should** fear God *properly*, but they don’t. God’s word highlights this in Romans 3. Speaking of the unregenerate (those without saving faith in Christ alone) Romans 3 says their deadness in sin is marked by the fact that, “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Romans 3:18).

While unbelievers don’t fear God rightly, we can look back through history to different times and different people groups and find that there is such a thing as an unbiblical fear of God. Many different cultures and false religions have been governed by a superstitious kind of fear of what they generally perceive of as a very powerful deity. Every known religion that has ever been invented by man is an attempt to appease God through some kind of human effort. During the Dark Ages, the Roman Catholic church was able to wield a significant amount of power over people and even kings and governments, in large part due to preying on people’s superstitious “fear of God”. This was mostly a dreadful fear of God – a fear that was rooted, not in the biblical understanding of God’s true character and nature, but rather in the thought that God was an unstable, angry deity who needed to be appeased by man’s efforts or He might blow up in anger at any moment and bring some kind of ruin or misery to their already difficult lives.

This kind of unbiblical dread does not honor God in its aim but it does still glorify God in the display of the terror of His righteous wrath towards sin. It also serves in some degree to promote a level of civil obedience that can keep society from being as bad as it could be. While this is not a proper fear of God, there can be a temporary good that comes from a dreadful fear of God’s wrath. It can be the means God uses to maintain a level of civility in society, a way of providing for human flourishing. It can also be the means God uses to bring sinners to repentance at His appointed time, when the gospel is proclaimed to them and the Holy Spirit gives them ears to hear the good news. The fear of punishment by God, or the fear of His wrath, is the appropriate response of those who are in rebellion against God, for those who are His enemies.

In other words, the unsaved person who has a dreadful fear of the wrath of God due them because of their guilt and sin is in a better place than the person who does not. The person who fears God’s wrath is at least in a position to be concerned with the reality of God’s wrath due their sin.

This does not in any way place them in a better standing before God or earn them any kind of good credit with God. Too many that claim Christ in our day want to comfort unbelievers by telling them that God loves them just the way they are. They want to remove the offense of the gospel by minimizing the wrath of God against their sin and the fact that they are enemies of God while they remain in their sin and unbelief. We must not shy away from letting sinners feel the weight of their true condition before God. Only those who are able to see their true condition as sinners will ever be in a position to humbly embrace the good news of the gospel.

The great reformer Martin Luther was just such a man before God gave him a true saving faith in the gospel. Prior to his conversion, Martin Luther was a monk who lived in dreadful fear of God’s wrath every day. The standard of holiness and perfection that he saw in God’s word was a crushing weight that he knew he could never achieve. He would spend hours in the confessional repenting of every sin he could think of. He went to extreme measures of asceticism – punishing himself in drastic ways. He would starve himself and sleep on the cold floor with no blankets in an effort to pay penance for his sin.

This fear of God’s wrath did not bring about any peace or worship in Martin Luther. His fear of God did not come from a heart of love for God and His holiness. He went so far in one of his writings to say that at times he hated God.

His dread of God’s wrath lead to a sinful attempt by him to earn God’s favor through his own efforts, but by God’s grace his eyes were eventually opened to see that salvation and reconciliation to the one true God is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Martin Luther was right to believe that he deserved God’s wrath, and he was correct in believing that he was hopeless to ever achieve the level of perfection required by God’s perfect holiness. It was this right view of God’s holiness in contrast to his own sinfulness that made the good news of the gospel so wonderful to him. He did not lose his fear of God after he was set free from the dread of God’s wrath. His fear of God was transformed, now marked by loving worship and a devotion to the true knowledge of God found in scripture and this caused him to risk his life opposing the false teaching of the Pope and the Roman Catholic church. When he was put on trial and commanded to recant, his unwillingness to do so was grounded in the fact that he feared God more than he feared man.

Many of the Martyrs of the Christian faith clung to the words of Jesus in :

**Matthew 10:28** “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

I want to come back to my statement that for the unsaved there is no fear of God. What I mean is that there is no saving fear of God. There is not a fear that bears the fruit of true repentance.

**Proverbs 1:7** The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;

fools despise wisdom and instruction.

You cannot know God in a saving way if you do not fear Him. It is possible to be afraid of God’s wrath or punishment and not be saved, but it is not possible to be saved without a fear of God’s wrath. I am not contradicting our definition which clearly states that for the saved the fear of God is not a fear of His wrath. What I mean is that there is a truth to the reality of God’s wrath against sin that every sinner must see as God’s righteous and holy judgment towards them before they can truly repent. The fear of wrath for the now saved is no longer about possibly meeting God’s wrath, rather it’s a respect for the reality of God’s wrath due sin.

If you have your Bible’s please turn with me to Deuteronomy 5:23-29. While you are turning there, I’m going to read a short passage in Exodus to give you the context for what we will read in Deuteronomy 5:23-29.This is taking place at Mount Sinai when God came and spoke to Moses in a thick cloud before all the people of Israel.

**Exodus 20:18-20** Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off 19 and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." 20 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."

**Deuteronomy 5:23-29** And as soon as you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes, and your elders. 24 And you said, 'Behold, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire. This day we have seen God speak with man, and man still live. 25 Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, we shall die. 26 For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire as we have, and has still lived? 27 Go near and hear all that the Lord our God will say, and speak to us all that the Lord our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it. '

28 "And the Lord heard your words, when you spoke to me. And the Lord said to me, 'I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you. They are right in all that they have spoken. 29 Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!

… They are right in all that they have spoken. They were right to fear God as they did. They were right to cry out for a mediator. They were right to say that they would die if they drew near to this great fire of God’s holy presence. God says “Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments”.

They were overwhelmed by the awesome display of God’s presence and showed great reverence and awe. God was pleased by their humility in that moment.

They honored God in that moment by asking for a mediator. They were fulfilling God’s purpose for the Old Covenant nation of Israel to be a shadow and a type of what was to come in the New Covenant when we would have Christ as our perfect and final mediator. They were acknowledging their unworthiness to stand in the presence of God and yet they were also saying they did not want to be separated from Him, that they wanted to know and do His will.

NOT A FEAR OF HIS WRATH

When we say that the fear of God for the saved is not a fear of His wrath, it is important to note that we do not mean that the wrath of God is not to be feared in any way. We have already seen that it is foolish not to fear the wrath of God. When we say that the fear of God for the saved is not a fear of His wrath, we mean that the fear of God’s wrath for the saved does not result in us being afraid that God’s wrath is directed toward us. In other words, we the saved are not stuck in a constant state of fear that God’s wrath is ready to smite us with the next wrong move.

The difference between the fear of God’s wrath for the saved and the unsaved is the Gospel.

The gospel gives us a right understanding of God’s wrath. The gospel shows us that the wrath of God towards sin will not be set aside. God will not change His mind about that which he hates. His character is constant and unchanging and His wrath toward sin is good and righteous. If He did not have a perfect and serious hatred of sin He would not be good and righteous.

The gospel is the good news that the wrath of God due the elect has been propitiated in Christ. The great contemporary hymn “In Christ Alone” says it beautifully – “and on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied.”

The wrath that we deserve for our sin is not something the saved need to fear because it was completely absorbed by Christ on the cross. More than anything else, what Christ has saved us from is the wrath of God.

This gospel truth gives us an incredibly vivid display of how God’s wrath is certainly something to be feared by those it’s aimed at, yet it is simultaneously comforting for those who have put their trust in Christ. God’s wrath is real and right, and it’s been poured out on Jesus for those who trust in Christ alone. This dual effect of the gospel gives us a right awe/reverence for the holiness and majesty of God and motivates us to live lives that are pleasing to God. It also frees us from being paralyzed in fear for the fact that we deserve God’s wrath and could never do anything to escape it, by showing us that God has done for us what we could never do for ourselves, to make holy that which is not holy, and that by grace alone – not by anything that we have done or ever could do.

Rightly knowing of God’s wrath is a good thing that helps the believer return to repentance and faith when we have sinned or are tempted to sin. It is a humble reverence and awe for who God is AND what He has done to pay for our sin. Our sin should cause us to be reminded of God’s wrath and hatred of sin, and then drive us back in to the open arms of Christ. Repentance and faith, repentance and faith..seeing and believing that our sin is deserving of God’s wrath, and then being moved by the terrible thought of that to fix our eyes back on Christ, loving and trusting Him for all that He has accomplished for us.

It is only by faith in the substitutionary, atoning work of Christ that we are able to worship and adore God, free from the constant drear and terror of God’s wrath that will visit all those who reject Him.

I don’t like to use analogies very often because they have the potential to introduce error in our thinking if we aren’t careful, but I do have a story that I think can be helpful to make a distinction between a fearful awe and reverence for God versus a fearful dread and terror.

Several years ago I had the opportunity to hike to the peak of Half Dome in Yosemite. I don’t think that I am afraid of heights, I actually am disposed towards being more of a thrill seeker, but when I reached the top of that mountain and started walking toward the edge, I suddenly became paralyzed with fear. I could not bring myself to walk all the way to the edge. I was cautiously trying to peek over the edge while constantly making sure there was good footing, that the wind was not blowing too hard, that no one was near enough to spook me, etc…Finally, because I just didn’t trust myself to not slip or trip lose my balance, I laid prostrate on the rock and did an army crawl to the edge so that I could look all the way over. As I hung my head over the side and looked down at the shear face of the mountain and the great heights above the valley floor it was absolutely glorious. I was in awe.

Part of what captivated me was the potential danger, the power of the mountain to destroy me if I did not treat it with the respect that it was due. But another part of me was laying on the mountain, and drawing a sense of peace and safety from it as long as I was clinging to it. I don’t know how long I laid there and took it all in but I never got to the point where I was acclimated to the fear in such a way that I was ready to stand back up. When I was finally ready to go, I scooched myself back far enough to where I could see a good bit of solid rock between me and the lack thereof.

As I stood there I was genuinely afraid of what that mountain could do and WOULD do if I made the wrong move. There are deaths every year caused by people falling from Half Dome. There have been no survivors. That kind of error WILL result in death. So I was aware of that reality and it made me tremble as I saw it right in front of me. But I was not traumatized by it and I did not immediately turn and try to get as far away as I could. I approached it with a reverence, a respect for its power and might. I was not flippant or cavalier with it. I didn’t start jumping for joy and dancing around like a ballerina, and not because it’s greatness and beauty was not capable of eliciting that kind of response from me, but because it was inappropriate in that moment. I was too close to it – I had a heightened awareness in that moment to its potential power to destroy. But, I was not afraid that it was ***trying*** to destroy me. I knew that if I was destroyed by the mountain it would be because of my own error in not treating it with the proper respect that it so clearly demanded.

The analogy is helpful to me in that God is worthy of an even greater awe and reverence than we would have as we experience the majestic beauty and power of Half Dome. It also works in translating the serious consequences of sin, but we need to be careful not to think of God in ways that make our eternal standing with Him dependant on our proper fear of Him. Unlike the mountain, God’s wrath is not held at bay by our proper respect for Him. We do not maintain our right standing with God by giving Him the proper reverence or avoiding wrong moves. Our sin will have consequences in this life and it will affect our communion with God while it remains un-repented of but it will not change the fact that God has dealt with the punishment for our sin once for all at the cross.

The fear of God is the natural response of the truly saved but it does not maintain or contribute to our right standing with God. The fear of God is a good work that the Holy Spirit produces in us.

We live in a culture that does not fear God. There are fools who outright deny the existence of God. They do not fear Him because they have suppressed the truth that He exists. When that worldview is taken to its full end, society will disintegrate into chaos, anarchy, and ultimately destruction, because it will be every man for himself. There will be no moral restraint because without God there is no basis for morality. This kind of irreverence for God is pretty obvious.

But, there is another section of our society that acknowledges God and in many cases even claims to be Christian, but they do not exercise the awe and reverence His holiness demands.

**Hebrews 12:28-29** Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.

These others worship a god of their own making, by crafting a god in their minds who is NOT a consuming fire. They worship a false god. They pick and choose the attributes of God that fit their own desires. They define love as anything and everything that makes them feel happy or absent of any standard, consequence, or guilt. They start with the idea that love is something properly and universally defined and understood by all men, and then they place that definition over the top of everything that God’s word says about love. So when John says that God is love, they apply ***their*** definition of love to God. Now, when they read that God is a consuming fire, that God is wrath, that God is just, that God is holy, they find ways to subjugate these things to their definition of what is loving. So they redefine all of these things because they cannot see how God can be both love and wrath, mercy and justice.

They have a very skewed and limited view of God. They think they have found a way to keep Him at bay. To go back to the Half Dome analogy, they have seen if from the valley floor. They can look up and dance and celebrate at how awesome it looks from a distance. They can even acknowledge that it has the potential to destroy – the difference is that they have never really seen themselves at risk of that destruction. They think that they are perfectly safe from danger as long as they keep their distance, as long as they don’t get close enough to see the fullness of its demand for respect.

Now… it is good and right and God-honoring for us to stand back and focus on the love and mercy of God, and celebrate with joy and laughter, and dancing. But if that is the only way we ever approach God, not only are we missing out on the overwhelming blessing of knowing Him more fully, but we are also in danger of being deceived because we have not seen enough of God’s demand for holiness for us to truly repent and worship Him fully and rightly.

**2 Corinthians 7:1** Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

We need to maintain a full view of God’s character at all times, being careful not to become flippant or cavalier in our worship of Him. Let’s look at the last sentence of our answer. It says that the fear of God

“is also a humbleness and reasonable trembling towards God’s seriousness and power.”

This humbleness is a true knowledge of our place before God. It is a reminder that we are saved by grace alone, that we have received an undeserved gift from an unobligated giver. We will never arrive at a place where we are equals with the one who saved us. We never get to a place where we start to think that our right to come before the throne of God has released us from the demand to be holy and live for Him. We never get to the place where we think that we could be holy on our own, without the ongoing and sustaining grace of God.

**Philippians 2:12** Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling

**Psalm 96:9** Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!

We’re talking about a reasonable trembling, or an appropriate trembling. Remember the response by the people of Israel…

**Exodus 20:18** Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off

It is reasonable and appropriate to tremble in the presence of God. The reasonableness of it is due to God’s seriousness and power.

- Theologian John Gill says of this kind of godly fear, it is “not a slavish fear of death, of wrath, and damnation…but a reverence of the divine Majesty, an awe of his greatness and glory, a serious regard to his commands...and a carefulness to [not] offend him by disobeying [his commandments].”

**Isaiah 6:1-5** In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said:

 "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And I said:"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

When Isaiah was brought before the throne of God into the presence of His holiness, he cried out woe is me! He was instantly aware of how far short he fell of God’s glory. He said “I am lost”. Some translations say “I am undone”. Isaiah was not able to gaze at the perfection of God’s holiness without it un-doing him. He knew that the filth of his sin could not abide in the presence of God. This godly fear was not a self-centered focus on self preservation but more of an overwhelming awareness of the holiness of God. It was a humble acknowledgment of the truth that our sin- any sin- does not belong in the presence of a perfect and holy God.

Over and over again in scripture we see that fear is the most common response when someone has close contact with the power or presence of God. What is the first thing said when a messenger from God approaches someone? “Do not fear” or “Do not be afraid”.

Mark 4 tells the story of the disciples crossing the sea of Galilee when a storm arose and they thought they were going to perish. They woke Jesus and he commanded the sea to be still. Then:

**Mark 4:41** And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

They were more afraid after the storm was calmed then they were when it was raging. Why? Because when the storm was raging they thought that it was the most dangerous thing threatening them but they suddenly became very aware that there was someone in the boat with them who was much more dangerous. He didn’t even struggle with the storm, He rebuked it with a word and it obeyed. They realized that they were in the presence of God.

I want to wrap up by coming back to my opening statements about the application of these truths. Have you become too comfortable with majesty and holiness of God? Is your worship of God governed by a great awe and respect, with humility and reasonable trembling?

We who have trusted in Christ for our righteousness and salvation have no reason to be afraid of God. God is perfect and unchanging. He is not subject to mood swings the way we as creatures are. He does not change His mind. What He has said He will do. So we have no reason to be afraid of God the way we might be of human authority.

The gospel is the good news that Jesus has taken on all of the wrath due to those who trust in Him and keep His commandments – not as a way to earn His favor, but as a response to it. Jesus paid it ALL – that’s why He said “it is finished”.

If you have not put your trust in Christ, if you have not truly repented of sin and self reign, if you are still living in the arrogance of your own human wisdom (which is folly), you have reason to be afraid of God. You are dancing on the edge of the precipice and the only thing keeping you from falling into the eternal abyss is the mercy of God that is keeping solid ground under your feet for another day. But that temporary mercy giving you this life will end. Repent and believe before it is too late. Rest in Christ now and forever.

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

If God is stirring in you a fear of His wrath toward your sin, then repent and believe in the gospel. Don’t live another day under the terrible fear of God’s wrath.

If you are a believer being convicted tonight over unrepentant sin, repent and believe in the gospel! Don’t go another day living with the shame of self deception and the displeasure of your heavenly Father.

The fear of God for we who are saved is a great comfort. We know that the most awesome and dreadful power in the universe loves us and is on our side and that His power is at work in us to bring us to our final salvation.

Let’s close with the words of King Solomon as he closes the Book of Ecclesiastes:

**Ecclesiastes 12:13** The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

Let’s pray

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