

The Death of Holy Fear

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Somewhere along the way, we became very comfortable around God.

I do not mean that we became comfortable in the biblical sense—the confidence that belongs to those who have been reconciled to the Father through the blood of Christ. That confidence is one of the great privileges of the gospel. We have boldness to enter the Most Holy Place because Christ has entered before us. We cry, “Abba, Father,” because we have been adopted as sons and daughters.

But biblical confidence was never intended to produce casual familiarity. The God who tore the veil in two is still the God who dwells in unapproachable light. The God who welcomes His children is still the God before whom seraphim cover their faces and cry, “Holy, holy, holy.”

The cross did not diminish God’s holiness. It revealed just how infinitely holy He has always been.

I fear that we have quietly forgotten this.

Spend any amount of time in modern evangelicalism, and certain themes quickly rise to the surface. We speak often of God’s love, His grace, His mercy, His kindness, and His compassion. We should. These truths are precious beyond measure.

Yet as those themes have grown louder, another has grown strangely silent. We speak less of His blazing holiness. We speak less of His righteous wrath against sin. We speak less of His judgment.

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We speak less of the fear of the Lord—not because we have denied these doctrines, but because we have gradually treated them as truths better left in the background.

The result is subtle, but profound.

Church has become a place where people expect to feel welcomed, encouraged, and uplifted. We work hard to create environments where families can flourish, friendships can deepen, and children can learn the Scriptures. None of these things are wrong. In fact, they are good gifts from God.

Yet I cannot help but ask a question that has lingered in my mind for some time.

When was the last time we gathered together and trembled?

Not because the music stirred our emotions. Not because the sermon was especially moving. Not because someone shared a heartbreaking testimony.

When was the last time our hearts were overwhelmed simply because we were confronted with the holiness of God?

Open the pages of Scripture, and the pattern becomes impossible to ignore.

When God descended upon Mount Sinai, the mountain shook violently. Thunder clapped out. Lightning flashed. Smoke billowed upward as though the mountain itself was a blazing furnace.

The people stood at a distance and begged Moses to speak on God's behalf, to intercede for them, because they feared they would die if the Lord addressed them directly.

When Isaiah saw the Lord seated upon His throne, high and lifted up, he did not begin by celebrating his calling. He pronounced a curse upon himself. "Woe is me!" was not the cry of an unbeliever terrified of punishment. It was the response of a prophet suddenly confronted with the immeasurable holiness of the God he served.

When Ezekiel beheld the glory of the Lord, he fell on his face.

When Daniel received a vision of heavenly glory, all his strength left him.

When Peter realized whose boat he was standing in, he did not ask Jesus for a blessing. He fell at His knees and cried, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

Even John, the beloved disciple who leaned upon Christ during the Last Supper, fell at the feet of the risen and glorified Christ "as though dead."

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These were not pagans encountering an unfamiliar deity.

These were God's people.

The closer they came to Him, the greater their fear became.

This is what troubles me. We often speak as though intimacy with God naturally produces informality. Scripture consistently teaches the opposite. The people who knew God most deeply were also the people who stood most humbly before Him. Their knowledge of His love did not shrink His majesty. It magnified it.

Perhaps we have mistaken reverence for distance.

Perhaps we have assumed that because Christ has removed our condemnation, He has also removed the need for holy fear.

The New Testament says otherwise.

Paul exhorts believers to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” Peter tells Christians to “conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.” The writer of Hebrews, after unfolding the glories of the New Covenant, concludes by saying, “Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”

Notice what he does not say.

He does not say that God *was* a consuming fire under the Old Covenant.

He says He *is*.

The God of Sinai is the God of the empty tomb. The God who spoke the universe into existence is the God who invites us to His table. The God who justifies sinners through faith in Christ has not ceased to be infinitely holy. That realization should shape everything we do.

It should shape the way we worship. It should shape the way we preach. It should shape the way we pray. It should shape the way we approach His Word. There is a world of difference between joyful worship and casual worship. Scripture calls us to the first while warning us against the second.

I sometimes wonder whether our generation has become so determined to convince people that God is approachable that we have forgotten to tell them that He is also utterly holy. We have become eager to assure sinners that they need not fear coming to Christ,

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yet we rarely remind them that the Christ to whom they come is the King before whom every knee will one day bow and every tongue confess.

The fear of the Lord has never competed with the love of God. It is one of the fruits of seeing Him rightly.

The more clearly we behold His holiness, the more astonishing His grace becomes. The more deeply we understand His justice, the more precious His mercy appears. The more we grasp His majesty, the more amazing it is that He calls us His children.

Perhaps what our churches need most is not another strategy, another conference, or another program. Perhaps we simply need to recover the God of the Bible.

Not a smaller God who fits neatly within our preferences. Not a more manageable God who never unsettles our consciences. The God before whom prophets fell silent. The God before whom angels veil their faces.

The God whose holiness consumed His own Son on the cross so that guilty sinners might stand forgiven.

Until we recover that vision of God, we will continue producing churches that know how to smile together, sing together, and study together, but rarely know what it is to fall on our faces together before the Lord of glory and tremble.

And if the fear of the Lord truly is the beginning of wisdom, then perhaps its absence explains far more about the condition of the modern church than we have been willing to admit.

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