

The Joy of Fearing God

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, we are memorizing verses from Isaiah 40 together, and I'd like to go there now because the entire passage that I'll read emphasizes the greatness of God.
- Turn with me to Isaiah chapter 40 and verse 12. And I am reading from the Christian Standard Bible. Verse 12.
- Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand or marked off the heavens with the span of his hand? Who has gathered the dust of the earth in a measure or weighed the mountains on a balance and the hills on the scales?
- Who has directed the spirit of the Lord or who gave him counsel? Who did he consult? Who gave him understanding and taught him the paths of justice?
- Who taught him knowledge and showed him the way of understanding? Look, the nations are like a drop in a bucket. They are considered as a speck of dust on the scales.
- [1 : 0 8] He lifts up the islands like fine dust. Lebanon's cedars are not enough for fuel or its animals enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before him.
- They are considered by him as empty nothingness. With whom will you compare God? What likeness will you set up for comparison with him?
- An idol? Something that a smelter casts and a metal worker plates with gold and makes silver chains for? A poor person contributes wood for a pedestal that will not rot.
- He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not fall over. Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been declared to you from the beginning?
- Have you not considered the foundations of the earth? God is enthroned above the circle of the earth. Its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like thin cloth and spreads them out like a tent to live in.
- [2 : 0 8] He reduces princes to nothing and makes judges of the earth like a wasteland. They are barely planted, barely sown. Their stem hardly takes root in the ground.
- When he blows on them and they wither. And a whirlwind carries them away like stubble. To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?
- Ask the Holy One. Look up and see. Who created these? He brings out the stars by number. He calls all of them by name. Because of his great power and strength.
- Not one of them is missing. Jacob, why do you say? And Israel, why do you assert? My way is hidden from the Lord and my claim is ignored by my God. Do you not know?
- Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God. The creator of the whole earth. He never becomes faint or weary. There is no limit to his understanding.
- [3 : 0 3] He gives strength to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Youths may become faint and weary. And young men may stumble and fall. But those who trust in the Lord will renew their strength.
- They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not become weary. They will walk and not faint. When I was a child growing up in the South, it was common to hear people refer to one another as God-fearing.

He is a God-fearing man. She is a God-fearing woman. They were not merely Christians. They were God-fearing Christians. And that was always meant to be a compliment.

What did people mean when they referred to someone as God-fearing? Well, they did not mean he or she was paralyzed by fear. As though that person were trembling in the corner.

It was not a phobia of God. It was not an irrational or crippling fear. Instead, they were referring to someone's appropriate level of fear.

[4 : 09] Or perhaps I should say an appropriate kind of fear. More often than not, what they meant by God-fearing Christian was someone who doesn't merely call himself a Christian.

He believes what he claims. And he lives according to what he believes. He isn't a nominal Christian. In name only. He sincerely fears God in the way Scripture defines a proper fear of God.

In other words, his devotion to God is greater than his devotion to anything else. Today, we don't use that kind of language too often.

And I think it's fallen out of favor for at least two reasons. First, talk of fearing God can make people uncomfortable. I remember when I was younger and I would hear a preacher say something in a sermon about fearing God.

I would immediately move to the edge of my seat. Because I wanted to hear him explain what that meant. Because that was a difficult concept for me to wrap my head around.

[5 : 17] I could understand loving God. I could even understand why some people would need to fear God. But I'm looking around the sanctuary at all of these Bible-believing, commandment-keeping Christians, thinking to myself, why should they fear God?

More than a few pastors and churches today have almost altogether removed the fear of God. And I think it's for that very reason.

If you want people to feel more comfortable, the fear of God is probably not the first subject you'll run to. Generally speaking, contemporary Christendom prefers a more casual approach to God and to religion.

Today, God is less sovereign Lord and more my buddy. Does anyone remember those bumper stickers that said, Jesus is my homeboy? It's hard for me to imagine someone having such an irreverent bumper sticker truly having a proper fear of God.

The second reason I don't think we hear much about fearing God anymore is perhaps that people don't hear enough about God. Almost everyone knows a little something about God.

[6 : 36] If nothing else, they know He's merciful, they know He's loving. But that's hardly the totality of God. He's also immutable. He's infinite.

He's self-sufficient. He's omnipotent. Omniscient. Omnipresent. Wise. Just. Good. Holy.

Glorious. And frankly, if we take any of those attributes from Him, He ceases to be God. Practically speaking, if we ignore any of those attributes, we lose our motivation to fear God, our reasons for fearing God.

For instance, if God is loving but not necessarily holy, that begs the question, why should we really fear Him? Well, in an effort to make people feel more comfortable with God, many have removed what should be the very first response we have to God.

Proverbs 1-7, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fearing God comes at the beginning. It is foundational to the Christian life.

[7 : 49] If we want true knowledge, that is, if we want to know about anything worth knowing, the knowledge begins with the fear of the Lord.

We can learn science, we can learn math and language and many other important subjects, but we can't really know about God Himself or other spiritual matters apart from the fear of the Lord.

It is the beginning of knowledge. It is to say until we become God-fearing people, we don't really know anything. We can go further.

Every step of the Christian life should be another step toward increasing reverence for God. Proverbs 23-17 says, always fear the Lord.

Always fear the Lord. Fearing God is not, you know, an initiation into the Christian life which we eventually leave behind. We don't outgrow fearing God.

[8 : 51] Instead, we grow to fear Him more. Consider Ecclesiastes 12-13. The author writes, the conclusion of the matter is this. Fear God and keep His commands.

This is the whole duty of man. Boil everything down and what's left? Fear God. It is the beginning. It is the conclusion.

It is for every day in between. Always fear the Lord. Growing in grace is growing in godly fear. What did John Murray say? The fear of the Lord is the soul of godliness. What does it mean to fear God?

As we've heard from Roger, it's not a dread of God. It's not a slave cowering in the corner because he's afraid of his oppressive master. Godly fear is to stand in awe of God.

It's to feel a trembling within your soul at the thought of God. Imagine standing on a high cliff somewhere in the mountains. And as you step to the edge and you see how high you are.

[9 : 56] Something about that experience can take your breath away. Suddenly you feel very small and almost insecure. You're overwhelmed by the immensity of the world around you.

Yet you're also captivated by its beauty. That illustration isn't perfect, but it gives you at least a sense of what it means to stand in awe of God.

There's a feeling of astonishment. Feeling of amazement. We recognize how great God is. And how small we are. To fear God is to be full of reverence for him.

It's to be gripped by his greatness and his glory. And like standing on the edge of that cliff, we must take him very seriously. Playing around on the edge of a cliff is a very terrible idea.

And treating God as trite or trivial is an even worse idea. That's the opposite of fearing God. To be too cavalier or to be too casual toward God is the opposite of the fear that we ought to have.

[11 : 08] Instead, we should approach God soberly. As we honor him. And we obey him. And we worship him. It disturbs me how flippant some people can be about God and about spiritual matters.

And when I hear people make statements about God that are entirely void of reverence, I want to remind them that God holds our lives in the palm of his hand. What did Paul say?

In him, we live and move and have our being. In other words, God does not have to take someone's life. All he has to do is stop giving it.

Now, I can't speak for anyone else, but that makes me feel pretty small. And more importantly, it makes me overwhelmed by the immensity of God. Here I am in the palm of his hand.

How could I ever be flippant toward him? When the apostle John came face to face with the unfiltered glory of Christ, he fell at his feet as though he were dead.

[12 : 13] When Isaiah saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, his immediate response was to cry out, Woe is me, for I am ruined.

According to Job chapter 1, the thing that set Job apart from everyone else, the characteristic that made him a man of complete integrity was that he feared God.

And the Bible is replete with examples of godly fear among godly men and women. In short, the biblical examples show us that no one is merely a believer.

They are God-fearing believers. And in case we're tempted to think that fearing God is exclusively Old Testament, you know, back when he rained down fire from heaven, and he flooded the earth, and he sent plagues upon his enemies, godly fear is godly fear, period.

Again, the definition is not a dread of God or cowering in the corner. It is reverential awe in our hearts. And we see plenty of examples of this in the New Testament as well.

[13 : 20] Immediately following the baptisms of 3,000 people in Acts chapter 2, we're told these new Christians, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayers, and we're told everyone was filled with awe.

In Acts chapter 5, a great fear came on all in the church. A few verses later, same chapter, great fear came on the whole church.

They personally witnessed the power of God working through Peter. They saw how seriously God should be taken, and godly fear was the natural response.

And listen to what the text says next. Many signs and wonders were being done among the people through the hands of the apostles. They were all together in Solomon's colonnade.

No one else dared to join them, but the people spoke well of them. Believers were added to the Lord in increasing numbers, multitudes of both men and women.

[14 : 26] Now, I find that kind of curious. After seeing God's power through these signs and wonders performed by the apostles, we're told no one else dared join them.

And yet the very next verse says believers were added to the Lord in increasing numbers. Evidently, fear led some to stay away from the church and led others to join it.

Regardless, they all had a measure of fear. They all respected God's power. They all, to some degree, took it seriously.

It motivated some to submit to his will and others to seemingly run away. But the power was undeniable. I'll read one more example from the New Testament.

Acts chapter 9 says, So the church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

[15 : 34] Now, over the years, there have been many church conferences designed to develop and to discuss church growth strategies, right? But I don't know that I've ever heard of one that focused on the subject of fearing God.

Perhaps they should. Living in the fear of the Lord, the early church increased in numbers. Hebrews 12.28 says to New Testament believers, Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful.

By it, we may serve God acceptably with reverence and awe. If nothing else, we should realize that fearing God is good.

It's good. Proverbs says, The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life. But as Roger pointed out a couple of weeks ago, godly fear is challenging to define.

There's a sense in which I think it's either understood or it's not. Perhaps the best way for us to grasp this concept is to momentarily set aside the fear of God and focus instead on God himself.

[16 : 52] Again, when the attributes of God are missing, when we aren't seeing the true God of the Bible, reverential awe and all that godly fear encompasses are prone to be missing as well.

So let's consider the God of the Bible, starting with his greatness. After Moses and the Israelites crossed the Red Sea on dry ground and they watched Pharaoh's army be swallowed up by the water behind them, Moses and the people began singing their praises to God in Exodus 15.

And they sang, You overthrew your adversaries by your great majesty. Years ago, I read a book titled, The Fury of God, which left an impression on me.

The author's description of the flood in Noah's day I found to be especially compelling. You know, many of us have been reading these Bible stories since we were children. And though we believe them to be true, they almost feel fictional to us, don't they?

This is a point Jerry Bridges makes in his book. He writes, The narrative parts of the Old Testament often read like an adventure novel. Many of the stories really are high drama.

[18 : 13] They can lull us into the attitude that what we're reading is hardly more than good fiction. Reinforcing that tendency is the abundance in these stories of miraculous events that seem so unreal today.

We don't read in our newspapers of someone killing a thousand men with a donkey's jawbone, as Samson did. We don't hear about floating axe heads or a family living for months on only a handful of flour and a little jug of oil.

Yet, if the Bible is indeed God's word, we know these amazing stories are authentic accounts of real events happening to real people like you and me.

Going back to The Fury of God, the author of that book, he puts his readers on the ark with Noah as the flood comes. He's forced to speculate to some degree, of course, but he writes what is probably a relatively accurate account as the scene unfolded.

Can you imagine the sights and sounds of that experience? If the rain itself wasn't terrifying enough, imagine what it was like to be trapped in that ark and to feel as it begins to sway as it rises with the water.

[19 : 29] Did Noah hear booms of thunder? Did he hear people screaming outside as they realized the ground was disappearing under the water? I mean, were people banging on the ark to be let in?

That's plausible. We don't know, but when we take a moment to put ourselves in those situations, to imagine what it was like for those real people and those real events, how can we not fear God?

How can we not describe God as a great and awesome God as Moses did? Psalm 96 says, For the Lord is great and is highly praised.

He is feared above all gods. Psalm 104 says, My soul, bless the Lord. Lord my God, you are very great. You are clothed with majesty and splendor.

Psalm 150 says, Praise Him for His powerful acts. Praise Him for His abundant greatness. His greatness is so abundant, in fact. Psalm 145 says, The Lord is great and is highly praised.

[20 : 39] His greatness is unsearchable. Now, that doesn't mean we can't know anything about His greatness. It means that we can only begin to comprehend His infinite greatness.

The fact is, everything we can know about God points to His greatness. So, on every page of Scripture, starting with the very first verse, In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Now, mankind has created some pretty impressive things, but God created the universe. It's been said, the four most important words of the Bible are the first four words of the Bible.

In the beginning, God. If nothing else, those four words remind us that God is greater than all. He is the origin.

He is the source of everything. It's no wonder. We can only begin to comprehend His greatness. We are merely His creations. His greatness must be unsearchable to us.

[21 : 48] If your Bible is still open to Isaiah 40, glance down at verse 12 again. You'll notice Isaiah ascribes several human characteristics to God to illustrate God's immense greatness in creation and in history.

And he reminds us just how small we are by comparison. Verse 12 says, Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand?

The implied answer is God alone. More than two-thirds of the earth is covered by water. Earlier this week, I read that if you took all of the earth's water and you poured it on top of the United States, not only would the land be completely covered, of course, but the water would be at least 107 miles deep.

Now, as a reference point, the distance between ground and space is about 60 miles. The average depth of the ocean is about three miles. God can hold all of that water in the hollow of His hand.

I can't hold enough water in the hollow of my hand to quench my thirst. Verse 12 continues, Who has marked off the heavens with the span or the breadth of His hand?

[23 : 12] A hand breadth is the distance between your thumb and your pinky finger when it's stretched out. For me, a hand breadth is maybe seven or eight inches.

For God, all of creation fits between His thumb and His pinky finger. Now, not including the sun, the nearest star to earth is more than 26 trillion miles away, and that's just the first star we'd come to.

God can measure those 26 trillion miles and more with one hand. I love this verse from the book of Job.

Job says, These are but the fringes of His ways. We could explore every square inch of the universe and we'd only reach the fringes.

Isaiah continues, Who has gathered the dust of the earth in a measure or weighed the mountains on a balance and the hills on the scales? Now, by now, you probably understand what this passage is telling us.

[24 : 18] God is great and awesome. No one compares with Him. The boundless seas, the infinitely vast heavens, the majestic mountains that seem to reach the sky, not only are these things small and insignificant compared to God, but God, He spoke these things into existence from nothing.

Meditate on that. As Isaiah 40 continues, verse 15 shows us that God is greater than all the nations on earth. Look, the nations are like a drop in a bucket.

They are considered as a speck of dust on the scales. He lifts up the islands like fine dust. Lebanon's cedars are not enough for fuel or its animals enough for a burnt offering.

All the nations are as nothing before Him. They are considered by Him as empty nothingness. All the nations, all of history's greatest empires, all of their citizens, all of their power, all of their military might, all of their weapons of war are like a drop in a bucket or fine dust to Yahweh.

God is infinitely greater than natural creation and He's infinitely greater than anything humanity has ever produced. according to verse 23, God is greater than princes and judges.

[25 : 52] He blows on them and they wither and a whirlwind carries them away like stubble. As Proverbs says, a king's heart is like channeled water in the Lord's hand. He directs it wherever He chooses.

Even when we consider the most powerful people on earth, they do not compare to the greatness of God. I like what Jerry Bridges says about it.

He writes, think of the great rulers of history. Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonian Empire, was driven insane in a moment and for seven years ate grass as cattle do until God restored him.

Alexander the Great conquered most of the known world then died when he was only 32. Napoleon and Hitler tried to conquer all of Europe, yet Napoleon died in exile and Hitler in a besieged bunker.

Truly, the most powerful rulers of all time have ultimately faded before the sovereign power of the one who rules history. Now, a complete exposition of Isaiah 40 would certainly be worth our time, but let's skip ahead to the main point of this chapter.

[27 : 05] Look at verse 18. With whom will you compare God? Verse 25 asks the same question. And the answer is, no one.

There is no one who compares with God. There is nothing that compares with God. Jerry Bridges says, Isaiah 40 reminds us that God is far, far greater than anything we can imagine.

He is not limited to our most creative ideas. There can be no comparison between God, infinite, eternal, self-sufficient, and man, any man.

For we are all only creatures, finite, limited, and mortal. If we're to fear God, the infinitely vast distance between God and ourselves must ever be kept in mind.

Isaiah 40 will help us keep this perspective. So the next time we're standing on the edge of that cliff and we're awestruck by the glory of the sights and sounds, we should think back to Isaiah 40.

[28 : 08] God holds everything we see in the palm of His hand. His glory far exceeds the breathtaking glory of nature. As Psalm 19 says, the heavens declare the glory of God and the expanse proclaims the work of His hands.

Of course it does. He created it. Now in the time remaining, let's think back to Moses and the Israelites as they crossed the Red Sea.

I'll quote from Jerry Bridges again. He writes, to appreciate their predicament, imagine being finally delivered from slavery in Egypt only to see your former masters in hot pursuit and no way of escape.

What emotions would surge through you as you faced this extreme danger and later as you experienced miraculous deliverance. Imagine seeing the Red Sea waters divided, opening a way for you and two million others to walk through on dry ground.

You step down into the sea bottom with those walls of water towering above. Could they at any moment come crashing down? At last you reach the far side only to look back and see that the Egyptians have followed.

[29 : 29] Suddenly you watch those walls of water collapse. You witness an entire army drowning in the sea. In only a few hours you've experienced the highest degree of fear, apprehension, dismay, excitement, and overwhelming relief.

And how did the Israelites respond? Exodus 14 verse 31 says, when Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and believed in him and in his servant Moses.

Fear was the response. And it wasn't the same kind of fear the Egyptians inevitably felt when they saw that water coming down. It wasn't the same fear that the Israelites felt when they saw Pharaoh's army pursuing them.

Instead, they felt a reverential awe as a result of witnessing God's great power. They knew they were helpless to save themselves and they saw just a sample of what almighty God could do.

Suddenly, they felt very small and God appeared very big and very mighty. It's also worth noting that Israel not only feared the Lord in that moment, but they also believed in him.

[30 : 53] They saw him use his awesome power, not in some generic or universal way, if you will, but to save them in particular.

As Jerry Bridges says, power without love is terrifying. Love without power is pitiable. In God, the Jews saw both working together.

In other words, God didn't merely display his power or merely express his love. Moved by love, he used his power for the good of his people. And his people responded with godly fear and trust.

Fear and trust go hand in hand. Psalm 33 says, but look, the Lord keeps his eye on those who fear him. Those who depend on his faithful love to rescue them from death and to keep them alive in famine.

We wait for the Lord. He is our help and shield for our hearts rejoice in him because we trust in his holy name. May your faithful love rest on us, Lord, for we put our hope in you.

[32 : 08] Now, earlier in the psalm, the author writes, let the whole earth fear the Lord. Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. So, Psalm 33 really echoes Isaiah 40.

The whole earth should fear the Lord because he's the creator of all things. And no human ruler or army or nation could ever stand against him.

And going further, Psalm 33 makes a direct connection between fearing God and trusting him. Those who fear him have every reason to trust him.

And those who genuinely trust him also fear him. They stand in awe of his greatness and his glory. They know what he is capable of doing.

They know his power. And they know he uses that power for the good of his people. The Lord keeps his eye on those who fear him. Think of it this way.

[33 : 12] how could we put our trust in a God that we're not capable of fearing? If God isn't sovereign, if he isn't all powerful, capable of creating worlds and performing the mighty miracles of the Bible, how could we believe all things work together for the good of those who love God?

a fear-worthy God is the only God we can trust. And if God is worth fearing, he is worth trusting.

In Numbers 11, God asked Moses, is the Lord's arm weak? Or another way to phrase it, is the Lord's arm too short? In Genesis 18, he asked Sarah, is anything impossible for the Lord?

He says through Jeremiah, look, I am the Lord, the God over every creature, is anything too difficult for me? And the angel Gabriel said of him, for nothing will be impossible with God.

In summary, God is undeniably great. Therefore, we should stand in reverent awe of him.

[34 : 35] we should fear him. Our souls should tremble at the very thought of God. We should be astonished by him, amazed by him. We should worship him as we recognize just how small we are and how big he is.

We should be overwhelmed by his infinite perfection and glory. And because we fear him, we should trust him. if God is for us, who can stand against us?

Let's pray. Our heavenly, mighty Father, we are so thankful for your word.

We are so thankful for the clarification it gives us. Many of us have certainly seen your power, but maybe not displayed quite as vividly as it was at one time.

But as we go back and we read these stories and we know that for your spirit they are in fact true, we can witness your power from afar and we can learn better and better all of the reasons we have to fear you, to stand in awe of you, to take you very seriously.

[36 : 02] We're thankful for these testimonies of scripture. And we're thankful for you, for all of your attributes, from your sovereignty, to your holiness, to your love, to your mercy.

when we consider the totality of who you are, when we consider how big you are, especially as we consider also how small we are, we are so thankful for you and we do stand in astonishment.

Most of all because you've chosen to love us. You've chosen to come to this earth in the form of your son and save us.

Lord, we do not deserve that. And you've done it. And we stand in awe of you all over again as a result. Everything we can possibly learn about you causes us to fear.

And because we can fear you, we can trust you. We can follow your word and your commandments. By your grace, Lord, we are your disciples.

[37 : 16] And we're thankful to know that by your power, you do work all things together for our good. If you are for us, who can stand against us?

No one, Lord. We realize this. We thank you. We praise you. May you bless our worship and our fellowship this morning. In Christ's name, amen.

Amen. We're dismissed. podcast.