

A FEARING HEART

God - The FEAR of His people

*M*any of us as young children recited this simple prayer before meals: God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for this food and for our many blessings. Amen. In its abbreviated way it acknowledges two profound truths of God out of which all His temporal and eternal blessings to us as believers flow and why God is our Fear: His greatness and goodness.

In this lesson we are substituting fear for God in just the same way Jacob did in Genesis 31, when he entered into a covenant with his uncle Laban. Jacob swore by the God of his grandfather, Abraham, and the Fear of his father Isaac.¹ Laban on the other hand swore by all the gods of his family who were all idol worshippers. By this exchange, Jacob distinguished the one true God with whom he stood in covenant from Laban's idols.

As Father of the children of promise who stand in covenant with Him, God makes Himself known to us as our Fear, distinguishing Himself as the one, true God of Scripture—our LORD, the everlasting God, the Creator and Redeemer of His people—apart from the many gods worshipped today. But also, as children of the promise, our faith in God as the Fear of His people distinguishes us from simple professors of faith devoid of the fear of God. That fear makes us love God supremely, commit to doing what God commands, and exercise trust in God and His will being done on earth as it is in heaven even though we can't see past our circumstances. As children of the promise, we fear God and shun evil like Job², and we delight in our Fear and in our fearing of Him like Jesus³—and for two weighted reasons: God is great, God is good.

God is GREAT

No matter how awesome we perceive God to be, we cannot fully understand how great the LORD is and how worthy He is to be praised, because His greatness is something “no one can fathom.”⁴ It is because we are finite (limited) and God is infinite (unlimited and unbounded). Theology states this truth by describing God as incomprehensible—not to mean that He is

irrational or illogical so as to prevent us from following His thoughts at all, but that our minds cannot contain Him. We can, however, in part truly understand Him because He has graciously enabled us to do that but just not fully. As great as God is and as great as His works are—all of which are so worthy to be greatly praised, we discover that His greatness is far too big for our limited minds to grasp.

God knows our limitations and graciously condescends to our weakness and accommodates Himself to our incapacities through the inspiration of His written Word. In Scripture He uses anthropomorphic language where God is said to have a face, eyes, feet, hand, sit on a throne, fly on the wind, or fight in battle, etc. Scripture provides illustrations with which we are familiar to help us know the outer edges of His greatness. All of these help us appreciate the great lengths to which He went as the transcendent Lord to relate to His people as Father, Friend, gentle Shepherd. All display His greatness and should lead us to worship. We need to remember that the purpose of theology (the study of God) is doxology. God wants our study of Him—specifically our study of Him as our Fear—to bring us to worship, praising Him for being far greater than we know.

One such illustration is found in Isaiah 40. Here in this Old Testament passage God is showcasing the immensity of His greatness in creation and history and the reasons why He is the Fear of His people and why He is so worthy of worship. The verses that we are about to consider—verses 12-31—follow God’s word of “Comfort, comfort, my people.”⁵ In the Hebrew “comfort” is plural, denoting God is offering comforts upon comforts to His people - to those afflicted by their sin and alienation from God and to those suffering painful circumstances. God’s word of comfort here in this passage is nothing less than the Gospel, wherein true and lasting comfort is offered not only in terms of eternal life but also for living out the gospel in a fallen world, whether in times of peace or in times of calamity.

Read Isaiah 40:12-31.

Verse 12 begins with a rhetorical question ascribing a human characteristic to God and a measure with which we are familiar to help us get a handle on how unfathomably greater God is than nature. The verse is written out for you below and, in the parentheses, there is information to help you wrap your mind around God’s immensity. Meditate on what is written.

- “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand ...” (Two-thirds of the surface of the earth is covered by water, in places six miles deep and held in God’s hand—singular. Even if we could estimate it in gallons - our largest unit of liquid measure - the number would be beyond our comprehension, especially when we can only hold a mere tablespoon of water in our hand. Yet God holds all the waters of the earth in His one hand.)
- “ ...and marked off the heavens with a span,” (A span is when one holds the fingers far apart and then measures from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the small finger. God is here saying that He marked off the heavens by the span of His hand. We really cannot calculate the distance across the universe. We do know that the nearest star is over 26 trillion miles away or 4 ½ light years away. Since light travels at the speed of 186,000 miles per second, that nearest star is over 26 trillion miles away. Expressed numerically it looks like this: 26,000,000,000,000.)
- “ ...enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?” (a measure, or a basket in the NIV, is literally a one-third measure, like saying a quart is one-fourth of a gallon. Think about all the mountains in the world: Himalayas, Swiss Alps, Great Rocky Mountains, etc. and the hills weighed in the balance.)

In light of Job 26:14a, what is God essentially communicating about the immensity of His greatness compared with the magnificence of the oceans, heavens, mountains and hills He created?

The oceans, the heavens, the mountains are all incalculable to us, but not to God. Their measures are trivial to Him. The hollow of the hand, the breadth of the span, and the balance scales all speak of easy competence in relation to the task. Think of the boundless seas, the infinitely vast heavens and majestic peaks of mountains. As great as they are, they are nothing in comparison with God their Creator.

John Calvin in his commentary of Isaiah said that God is adorning His power in these questions and that there needs to be a deep conviction of His power deeply rooted in our hearts. That conviction would anchor our souls when life appeared to be out of control because our hearts would know that nothing was ever outside God's control. This verse is designed by God to raise our minds above this world to Him who created and sustains all things on, above and below earth—all by the sheer power of His Word.

A deep conviction of God's power is important for those who have put their faith in Christ as their righteousness. After referring to Romans 4:20, 2 Timothy 1:12; 1 Peter 1:3-5, and Romans 8:38-39, what comfort comes from believing the Gospel and trusting in God's power to make good His Word?

Now in verses 13 and 14 (Isaiah 40) God is expressing one truth of who He is in many ways. What is it? What are we meant to understand by that? Because that is true, what then should we accept as we live out the Gospel? (Isaiah 55:8-9, Jeremiah 29:11) And do? (2 Corinthians 5:7)

How would knowledge that God is All-Wise and a deep conviction of that look in our lives?

God delights in showing off His power and wisdom in what He has created and loves when we join David's praise: "O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all, the earth is full of your creatures."⁶ All of creation—including man, God's

image-bearer—is like an art gallery in which God parades the splendor of His wisdom. But all of it is designed to humble man and give reason for man to give God His due.

Acknowledging God's greatness by recognizing the vast difference between God and man was a turning point in the saga of Job. After Job concluded that, "It profits a man nothing when he tries to please God,"⁷ the Lord directly confronted him with a series of questions designed to put Job in his place—to humble him and to exalt Himself. God asked Job, "Who is this that darkens by counsel with words without understanding?"⁸ What follows in chapters 38-41 is one of those art galleries of God's creative wisdom and power, followed by another series of questions to which Job finally responded: "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me."⁹

Back to Isaiah 40. God arrests our attention in verse 15 with "Behold" - wanting us to pay special attention to what He says next about God's greatness in verses 15-17. What are we now to stop and consider and ponder?

The purpose of these comparisons is not to disparage the nations, but rather to communicate how great God is. As God was saying that He is infinitely greater than nature, so He is telling us that He is greater than all the most powerful nations. The sum of their power is indeed great, but compared with God they are nothing and worthless.

Isaiah goes on in verses 21-24 to emphasize that God is not only superior to the nations but also sovereign over those who rule them—as King of kings and Lord of lords. What is being said about the most powerful rulers of all time by the One who rules history? What is God's response to those who oppose Him? (Psalm 2:4)

Once again Isaiah draws our attention to creation in verse 26, a truth echoed in Psalm 147:4. What now shows off God's immensity, sovereignty, and power?

What's the point of all this? (Verse 18, 19, 20 and 25)

Verses 19 and 20 speak of the foolishness of thinking man-made idols can possibly compare with the Lord in His greatness. Remember from past lessons we learned that there is a subtle and sophisticated form of idolatry which ensnares many professors of faith and provokes the Lord to jealousy. It occurs when the LORD, the everlasting God and Creator, is reconstructed into another god, with a little "g". This god is not the great Jehovah who does not faint or grow weary, whose understanding is unsearchable, who gives power to the faint, who increases the strength of one who is weak so as to mount up with wings like eagles, run and not grow weary, walk and not faint.¹⁰

We as Christians say a hearty amen to the truth that God cannot be compared to nature, nations, rulers, or man-made idols. However, we are too often guilty of measuring Him up to our circumstances and problems and the issues of society around us and of seeing them as much bigger than God.

Moses did this when the people of Israel grumbled over their lack of meat. God had promised to give them their meat not for a day but for a whole month until they hated it. Moses whined to God saying, "Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, 'I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!' Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?"¹¹ Moses compared God to their situation - out in the desert with no visible source of meat—and found God wanting.

What was God's answer to Moses in Numbers 11:23? What about to Abraham in Genesis 18:14? To Jeremiah in 32:27? And to Mary in Luke 1:37? It is the same answer to us when we find ourselves comparing God to our situation.

As we learn to see God as great in both His Word and in His works to us and in us, we will begin to say with Jeremiah:

*No one is like you, O LORD;
You are great,
and your name is mighty in power.
Who should not fear you,
O King of the nations?
This is your due.
Among all the wise men of the nations
and in all their kingdoms,
there is none like you.¹²*

God is GOOD

Just as God is great with an unparalleled greatness in which no one can compare to Him, so is God's goodness unmatched because He alone is good.¹³ Goodness - in God as in human beings - means something admirable, attractive, winsome, and praiseworthy. But when Scripture speaks of God as good or of His goodness, it is primarily referring to all His moral qualities which prompt his people to call Him perfect—and in particular, His generosity which moves them to call Him merciful and gracious and to speak of his love.

When God is referring to Himself as good or calling attention to His goodness or when God's character is referred to in this way, it is always attached to God's 'forever' Name: I AM that I AM, the LORD.¹⁴ It reveals God to be self-existent, eternal and unchangeable in His character, incomprehensible, faithful and true to all His promises.

A good example of this is found Exodus 33, where God commanded Moses to gather up the people to leave Sinai and to go to the land

which He promised to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their offspring. However, God announced He would not go with them but would send an angel instead. The Israelites had seriously provoked God's anger by making the golden calf and God swore He would consume them if He accompanied them into the Promised Land. Moses dreaded the thought of going forward without the Lord's presence and interceded on behalf of the people. He begged God to keep His promise to go with His covenant people and to give them rest, in order to show all the people of the earth their distinctiveness and the glory of His great Name. Moses needed, for himself, to have God's favor reconfirmed so as to strengthen and encourage him to go on.

What did Moses, therefore, ask of God in Exodus 33:18? And from verses 19 and 20, what did God promise him?

Though the visible magnificence of this theophany is apparent from the text, what is being emphasized about God and His glory?

Exodus 34. Morning comes and Moses goes up the mountain to have God write His law upon those two new stone tablets, which meant that God was reconfirming His covenant with His people. It was at this time that God fulfilled His promise to Moses in Exodus 33:18,19.

In what way did God make "all His goodness"—His glory—pass before Moses in Exodus 34:5? And from the proclamation of His Name, how did God show Moses His goodness which is His glory? (vs. 6,7)

All the specific perfections that are mentioned here in Exodus 34, and all that go with them referred to in Scripture—God’s truthfulness and trustworthiness, His unfailing justice and wisdom, His tenderness, forbearance and noble kindness which are the foundation of our reconciliation and fellowship with Him—these together make up God’s goodness. They are the sum total of His revealed excellences: His glory.¹⁵

Within the cluster of God’s moral perfections there is something in particular to which the term “goodness” points—a quality which God especially singled out from the whole when He proclaimed “all His goodness” to Moses. Look back to Exodus 34:6. Can you identify what that one specific quality is which determines how all God’s excellences mentioned in that verse are to be displayed and exercised?

God’s goodness to man was introduced to us in the first chapter of our Bibles, when, after God had made everything, He uttered it was “good,” especially after fearfully and wonderfully making man in His image which was “very good.” God showered us with all good things to please us: the variety of foods with senses to enjoy them; all of nature—flowers, trees, mountains, birds in the air, fish in the sea - to charm us. But just think how in His goodness, He created our bodies, how perfectly our hands, feet, ears, eyes, brains, lungs, heart, colon, etc. were made to do their given tasks of maintaining life. Think about how God provided lids for our eyes and brows to protect them. Think about how good God is to have appointed sleep to refresh our bodies when tired. God is the great Giver and He abounds in His giving.

God’s goodness is magnified after man sinned, when man transgressed the law and love of his Creator. Still God exercised His generosity by extending mercy and grace instead of wrath. He continues to give to others in a way which has no mercenary motive and is not limited by what the recipients deserve but consistently goes beyond it.

God’s goodness is heightened to the nth degree when we look at Jesus, the One who would come and show the world the sinfulness of sin and display the greatness of the glory of God’s goodness to man. From John 3:16 and Romans 8:32, to what extent does God go to showcase

His goodness to sinful people who have no power in themselves to keep the law or to atone for this sin so that they can be right with Him? And what did that then guarantee?

As God does not willing afflict or enjoy to grieve men¹⁶ neither did He delight in the tears, cries, and inexpressible torments and suffering of the Son of His love. However, what did God do to show His unwillingness to let the least sin go unpunished in order to establish our peace and experience His goodness? (Isaiah 53:4-6,10; 2 Corinthians 5:21)

What comes to us as a result of receiving by faith Christ's redemptive work that again highlights God's generosity and magnifies His goodness? (Isaiah 43:25, Micah 7:18, Ephesians 1:7)

About the fullness and glory of God's forgiveness, Puritan John Shower in *God's Thoughts and Ways Are Above Ours* says this:

Forgiveness—being fully pardoned by God, displays how good God is in His goodness and gives us reason to fear. So says Psalm 130:4: "But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are to be feared." This mercy secures our eternal state, lays the foundation for peace of conscience, gives us freedom of access to the throne of grace, and makes way for our communing with God. God's forgiveness clears us from Satan's accusations, the condemnation of the Law and our own hearts, so that no one or no thing can lay any charge against those He forgives. Forgiveness is a fruit of God's covenantal love, which sweetens all our other blessings.

Charles Hadden Spurgeon in *A Fear To Be Desired* said this about God's goodness:

God's goodness should really amaze us but an amazement that is mixed with an element of fear. We wonder why God is so gracious to us for so long and in so many ways. We wonder why He has been so merciful and tender towards us, treating us as if we have never offended and grieved Him. We wonder why He has showered us with one blessing after another as if we deserved them. To wonder is to cry out, "O God, Your goodness is like the sun. I cannot look upon it, for it blinds my eyes. I fear because of Your goodness."

In closing, meditate on Psalm 107, a classical exposition of God's goodness, summoning the redeemed to "thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man." The psalmist generalizes from past experiences of Israel in captivity and their personal need and gives four examples of how the people cried out to the Lord in their trouble and how He delivered them. The first is God redeeming the helpless from their enemies and leading them out of barrenness to find a home. The second is God delivering those from darkness and the shadow of death who were suffering the consequences of rebelling against God. The third is God healing the diseases with which He chastened fools who disregarded Him. The fourth is God protecting voyagers by stilling the storm which they thought would sink their ship. Each episode ends with the refrain, "Let them give thanks to the LORD for his steadfast (unfailing) love, for his wondrous works to the children of men."

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable His ways!

For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been His counselor?
Or who has given a gift to Him
that he might be repaid?

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be glory forever. Amen

Therefore, by the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living

sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.¹⁷

1 Genesis 31:53,42

2 Job 1:1,8

3 Isaiah 11:3

4 Psalm 145:3

5 Isaiah 40:1

6 Psalm 104:27

7 Job 34:9

8 Job 38:23

9 Job 42:3

10 Isaiah 40:28-31

11 Numbers 11:20-21

12 Jeremiah 10:6-7

13 Matthew 19:17

14 Exodus 3:14

15 J I Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL, Intervarsity Press, 1973),161

16 Lamentations 3:33

17 Romans 11:31 – 12:3

Much of the material for the first part, “God is Great”, came from Jerry Bridges, *The Joy of Fearing God*. The second part, “God is Good,” from Packer’s *Knowing God*.