

The Bottom Line: Fear & Obey

Ecclesiastes Part 16

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 3-30-2014

Summary: Remember God before adversity comes because when it arrives it will be too late. Remembering means focusing on what God is like to the point where you hope in Him, prefer Him, and trust His way above your own. Ecclesiastes is God's Word, and the Preacher is reliable. Wisdom is like a goad (moving us when our flesh is resisting) and a nail (sticking in our minds). Don't go beyond the Scriptures. It is very simple: fear and obey God because Judgment Day is coming.

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Ecclesiastes 12:9 In addition to the Teacher being a wise man, he constantly taught the people knowledge; he weighed, explored, and arranged many proverbs. 10 The Teacher sought to find delightful sayings and write words of truth accurately. 11 The sayings of the wise are like goads, and those from masters of collections are like firmly embedded nails. The sayings are given by one Shepherd. 12 But beyond these, my son, be warned: there is no end to the making of many books, and much study wearies the body. 13 When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is: fear God and keep His commands, because this is for all humanity. 14 For God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

Remember God

Before Adversity Comes

Is there anybody here who thinks you are all done suffering in this life, and you don't think any big calamity is going to strike your life between now and when you die? If you do think that, you need to re-read Ecclesiastes. (And this time, pay attention.) If one thing was made clean in this book it is that we live in a fallen, futile, unpredictable world where just about the only thing you can really know for sure is that

something will go wrong soon. And throughout the book he teaches us how to enjoy life in a world like that. Last week we had a long section about enjoying your youth. And the secret to doing that is in 12:1.

Ecclesiastes 12:1 Remember your Creator in the days of your youth: Before the days of adversity come

In the context, **the days of adversity** refer to the difficulties of old age. In order to be able to handle those days, you have to remember your Creator *before* those days come. Let's think through the logic of that. Wouldn't it make more sense to say, "Remember your Creator when you are old?" Why does future difficulty mean I should mean I should remember God now? That only makes sense if waiting until old age would be too late. That is the implication of what he is saying. If you wait until all these hard things happen, by then it could be too late to accomplish what needs to be accomplished. Any time you see warnings in the Bible that tell you to make sure to prepare for a crisis before the crisis arrives, the implication is that if you wait until it arrives, it will be too late.¹ If you are going to be able to handle the hardships of old age, you are going to need some years of remembering your Creator prior to getting that old.

Recently I heard someone say, "I used to think that when men tend to get meaner when they get old. But now I no longer believe that. I think they were mean all along, but now they are just too tired to hide it like they used to."

In many cases I think that's true. We have various sins in our hearts – it might be anger, for someone else it might be worry, or laziness, or being a busybody, or pride. And when you are young, you have the internal strength to suppress the full expression of that sin. You don't want everyone to see the ugliness of it, so you keep some limits on it. But when you get old that internal strength goes away, and you can no longer hide what is inside you.² But if you remember your Creator while you are young, God can work on transforming those sinful traits into godly traits, so that when the strength goes away and people see the real you, what they see is good. That is one way it could prepare you. Another way is by simply giving you the spiritual strength and maturity to be able to have a right response to the hardships of old age.

And that principle applies not just to old age, but to any kind of adversity. Do you have a job now? Remember your Creator now, while you still have the job, so that when you lose your job you will be able to handle it. Is your liver still functioning – no dialysis? Remember your Creator now while you are still healthy. Is your marriage good? Good relationship with your kids? Do not wait until they go sour to remember your Creator because in many ways it will be too late. The point is, you need a running start of remembering your Creator prior to entering into the next calamity that is coming in your life. This is a broken, futile world, hardship is on the way, do not wait for it to hit to remember your Creator.

What Is Remembering God?

So what does it mean, exactly, to remember God? Obviously that is more than just remembering that God exists. Lots of people remember that God exists but they are not prepared for adversity.

Remembering What He Is Like

Remembering God has to do with the kind of thoughts you have about God – remembering what He is like. Thinking about His attributes to the point where it has an impact on your emotions.

¹ This is what worries me about the doctrine of the Pre-Tribulational Rapture. When Jesus gave all His warnings about the end times: "Be ready, watch out, be alert, be prepared – many will be deceived and fall away, so be ready..." The implication of all that is if you don't prepare ahead of time, then you will be one of the ones who ends up being deceived. You cannot just wait until that time and then worry about trying to become discerning and strong in Christ – it will be too late then. So I worry about a doctrine that sweeps all those warnings aside and says, "Don't worry about all that. None of that applies to us."

² A similar thing can happen when a person sustains a brain injury. They lose the ability to restrain certain sins of the heart, and so those things come out a lot more and it seems like the brain injury caused them to become more sinful. Any kind of weakness can have that effect – even sickness or lack of sleep.

Psalm 63:5 My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you. 6 On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night. 7 Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings.

He remembered God in a way that satisfied the cravings of his soul and made him want to sing.

Putting Your Hope in Him

When you remember God that way it brings hope into your heart.

Psalm 42:5 Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and 6 my God. My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you

Do you see how putting your hope in God is parallel with remembering God? You call to mind how worthy God is of hope and trust, and that will change a disturbed, depressed, downcast, empty soul into a fulfilled, singing, satisfied soul.

Psalm 137:6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem above my highest joy.

There God's city is put in place of God Himself, but it is the same idea. To remember Jerusalem means to **consider it above my highest joy**. Whatever your highest joy in this world is – your favorite activities, favorite people, favorite places – all the best stuff in this life – God is better. Remembering God means thinking of Him in a way that makes you really believe that.

Trusting Him Enough to Follow

And the more you do that, the more you will trust God enough to follow His way. But if you do not remember God that way, then the path of sin will look more attractive to you.

Judges 8:33 ...the Israelites again ... set up Baal-Berith as their god 34 and did not remember the LORD their God

They did not think of God as being more satisfying and better than any alternative so they ended up running after some other source of satisfaction.

Deuteronomy 8:19 If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow after other gods to worship and bow down to them ... you will perish.³

Remembering God is when you are so focused on what He is like, that you trust His way enough to follow His way. The prophet Jonah did not remember God that way, and so he disobeyed. But then when he was about to drown at the bottom of the sea, he once again remembered God.

³ Why do we imagine that some way other than God's way will be more satisfying? It is because we trust our own judgment more than we trust God's Word. God's Word says, "The path to greatest joy is sex only within marriage." Our instincts say, "This other way feels so right, it cannot possibly be wrong. This has to be the best path to happiness!" And we trust our feelings as being more reliable than God's Word. Idolatry of the heart ultimately comes from trusting yourself. The reason we replace God with something else – some false god - is because we trust our own instincts and our own desires and impulses and feelings, so we search around for something in this world that affirms that, and we set that thing up as our god and our source of joy. That is how people shop around for a religion. They just look for a belief system that says what they already believe because they ultimately trust themselves. I get that from the context of that verse I just read in Deuteronomy 8. In verse 19 God says "You forget Me and follow other gods." But how did that come to pass? Look at the verses right before that. **Deuteronomy 8:16 He fed you in the wilderness ... so that in the end He might cause you to prosper. 17 You may say to yourself, 'My power and my own ability have gained this wealth for me,' 18 but remember that the LORD your God gives you the power to gain wealth.** Self-trust comes when we try to take the credit for what God has done in our lives. "I worked hard for what I have. I made sacrifices. I made smart investments. I did all this." And you forget that all those things you did come from the Lord and His enabling grace. Remembering the Lord involves remembering that all the good things in your life came from Him, not from you. When we forget that, we won't trust God enough to follow Him, and we will follow after something else instead.

Jonah 2:7 As my life was fading away, I remembered Yahweh. My prayer came to You, to Your holy temple. 8 Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

It is not that he had forgotten about God. He was very cognizant of God while he was running away from Him. But when he was about to drown, he remembered God in the sense of turning back to Him in faith and trusting Him enough to obey Him.⁴

All that is what remembering God means, and you have to do that before adversity comes, so that when adversity does come you can say with Job, “The LORD has given and the LORD has taken away.” If I am relying on myself, and something bigger than me comes along, I am finished and I will either fall into despair, or resort to sin in order to keep from losing what I don’t want to lose. But if I see all the good things in my life as belonging to God, then when I lose them I just say, “God took them away.” And my life does not crumble to pieces because God is someone I can trust. If He takes something away, then I know for sure it wasn’t good for me to have that thing, and so I am actually better off. But I cannot think that way unless the whole time I do have the gift I am remembering it is from God.

Enjoy

Calamity is coming. That is the forecast in a fallen world – clouds and 100% chance of calamity before very long. It is coming.

8 "Absolute futility," says the Teacher. "Everything is futile."

The fall and the curse are everywhere. You cannot escape them. So remember your Creator now, before calamity strikes. Think about what He is like. Use food and drink and money and marriage and kids and work to enjoy His attributes. Spend quality time with Him. Learn about Him, and enjoy seeking His presence. Enjoy His Word, and enjoy walking in His way. Enjoy being guided by Him. Enjoy being protected by Him. Enjoy being healed by Him. Enjoy being strengthened by Him. Enjoy being sanctified and made holy by Him. Enjoy having Him as your Father. Enjoy being disciplined by His perfect, loving, wise God that does you only good and never harm. Enjoy being used by Him in His kingdom work. Enjoy the security and confidence you can have in His great and precious promises. Remembering your Creator means enjoying all that more than the greatest earthly pleasure.

Thus Saith The LORD

That concludes the final major section of Ecclesiastes. Then in the last two verses God draws a conclusion and gives us the bottom line on everything He has said. But before doing that, he wants to make sure we understand that the words in this book are reliable. Many interpreters have doubted whether we can trust what the Preacher says in this book. All kinds of theories like, “This book is all about what not to do. The writer gives us 11 chapters of doing it the wrong way, and then at the end says, “Don’t make the same mistake I did.” That is a very common approach to this book, so God tells us at the end, “No, the Preacher is absolutely right on.” Notice, it is not even the preacher who is speaking. He is speaking throughout the whole book, and now at the end God speaks to let us know we can trust the Preacher’s words.⁵

⁴ See also Isa.17:10 and Zech.10:9.

⁵ We do not know if this final portion was written by the Preacher or by some later editor who put the book together. Just as Moses wrote Deuteronomy but then at the very end is the account of his death, no doubt written by a later editor, but still inspired by the Spirit, so we see a similar thing here. Whoever the writer, the Author is God. Very often in Old Testament books there is a break in the normal flow and comments are made by a narrator who speaks from an omniscient point of view, speaking as God Himself as it were.

The Preacher Is Reliable

9 In addition to the Preacher being a wise man, he constantly taught the people knowledge

Were there periods of failure in Solomon's life? Definitely. But by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit we know that whatever point in his life he wrote this book, it was not one of his times of failure. He was being wise, and the implication is that this book is the product of his wisdom. Solomon was an amazing man. It says **he constantly⁶ taught the people knowledge**. He learned that from his father, David, who also functioned as a pastor over the people.⁷ The term translated **wise man** was evidently a technical term to refer to a particular role in the ancient world. There was a class of men known as sages, or wise men, who were very highly regarded, and Solomon was one of them. The point is, this is a wisdom expert. You can bank on what he says.

9 ...he weighed, explored, and arranged many proverbs. 10 The Preacher sought to find delightful sayings and write words of truth accurately.

According to 1 Kings 4:32, Solomon spoke 3000 proverbs. Try to come up with 50 sometime and you will see what an accomplishment it was to write something like the book of Proverbs. And that book only has about 500. His full collection was 3000! Plus he was a musician and wrote over 1000 songs in his spare time. And he did not just collect all these proverbs – it says he **weighed, explored, and arranged** them. It is one thing to just gather a bunch of information. It is another thing to organize it into an arrangement that is useful. A proverb used in the wrong context does more harm than good.

Proverbs 26:9 Like a thornbush in a drunkard's hand is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.

Fools who get a hold of a proverb become dangerous, because they don't have the wisdom to apply it properly. But Solomon not only gathered all these thousands of proverbs, and taught the people how to apply them in the proper contexts.

Description of Wisdom

11 The sayings of the wise are like goads, and those from masters of collections are like firmly embedded nails.

Cattle Prod

A goad is a cattle prod. In our day we have cattle prods that give an electric shock – like a Taser. Back then they used a stick with sharp metal points on the end. Either way, the point is to inflict pain. If a 2000 pound animal decides he does not want to move, gentle nudges don't work. You need an instrument that can make him decide to move. Words of wisdom work the same way. Sometimes my flesh is like a big, fat, stubborn cow. In my laziness, or greed, or lust, or pride I want to move in one direction, and wisdom has to come along like a cattle prod to force a change of direction toward God's way. We need wisdom to get us moving in those times when we do not naturally want to move. It is ironic that we have to be goaded and poked with a cattle prod to do what the writer is calling us to do in this book, because what is he calling us to do? Enjoy life! Why do we need to be goaded to enjoy life? Because the path to the deepest and richest and most profound enjoyment is a hard path at the beginning. It is a path we would never naturally guess would lead to pleasure. The path of fearing God and living for His pleasure does not naturally look to us like the highway to enjoyment. We see another path – the path of indulging our immediate impulses and living without reference to God – fearing man and pleasing self. We see a path where death is not in view, and the curse and the fall and the futility of life are all ignored, and the gifts of this life are all treated like they are ours to keep. That path looks so attractive and easy at the beginning.

⁶ That word translated **constantly** – some versions just translated it “also.” But I think the Holman gets it right here. It is a word that refers to persistence. For other examples see Gn.46:29, Ps.84:4, Ruth 1:14.

⁷ 2 Sam.5:2.

But it leads to disaster, so every time we wander back on to that path, Solomon gives us another shot between the ribs with the cattle prod reminding us about death and the curse and the futility of life under the sun, and the fact that our only hope for real joy is trusting God's way.

Nails

The other description is **firmly embedded nails**. Proverbs have a way of taking the truth and pounding it in to your heart in a way that sticks. Wisdom principles are for making decisions in life, so you need them on the go. So when someone can take a whole, big, complex principle with all its implications and boil it down to a short, pithy, catchy little statement, you can just sort of put that in your pocket and take it with you, and it sticks in your heart like a nail in a 2X4.⁸

God's Word

Wisdom sayings are valuable, and Solomon is a reliable teacher of wisdom, because like all writers of Scripture, his wisdom comes directly from God.

11 ...The sayings are given by one Shepherd.

I believe that is a reference to God.

Psalm 23:1 The LORD is my Shepherd.

God is our ultimate Pastor. And that is a wonderful compliment to the title back in verse 1 – **Creator**. As our Creator God is transcendent, afar off, above and beyond this created universe. But as our Shepherd He is right there beside us, feeding us, protecting us, giving us rest, guiding us through life. He is our Shepherd, and He is the source of the words of wisdom. It is God who reveals all true wisdom.

Don't Go Beyond

And the particular reference here is to the words of the book of Ecclesiastes. It is God's Word.

12 But beyond these, my son, be warned: there is no end⁹ to the making of many books, and much study wearies the body.

Scripture often warns about going beyond what has been revealed in Scripture. Once you go beyond God's Word, you enter into an endless jungle of ideas and opinions and teachings that are wearying to study. There are two things worth reading – the Bible, and books that help you understand and apply what the Bible says. Nothing else. The Bible says to fulfill your calling. If God calls you to be an auto mechanic, then go ahead and read some books on auto mechanics so that you can obey God. God says to marvel at His power. So if a book on astronomy will help you do that, go ahead and read it. But anything that is not for the purpose of understanding or obeying Scripture – there is no point.

⁸ Sometimes you can learn principles from a sermon or a book, but the thoughts are so complex in your mind that if you went to explain them to someone else, it might take 10 or 15 minutes. When that's the case, you will find most of the time that those principles do not stick in your memory very well. Big, complex, abstract thoughts are hard to keep in your mind. But proverbs and wisdom sayings have a way of embedding themselves in your soul when you learn their meaning. For example, Proverbs 18:8 says **the words of a gossip are like choice morsels**. So many implications about gossip. It is like a really tasty piece of food – irresistible to the listener. And it does down inside the person and becomes part of him – shaping his outlook. It cannot be retrieved. It has its effect regardless of your motive. All those various principles all packed in to one, vivid image that is easy to remember.

⁹ The word translated **end** can mean stopping point, or it can mean purpose – just like the English word. It may be that that is the meaning here – to the writing of many books there is no purpose. If all he is saying is that books keep on being written endlessly, then one would think he would not need the word **many**. He could just say, "to the writing of books there is no end." Either way, the reference seems to be to books that go beyond Scripture.

If you try to use human wisdom, apart from Scripture to solve the problems of the human soul, that will be an endless maze that leads to nowhere but confusion. If you try to use human reasoning to figure out what God is like, it will be as exhausting as trying to jump over the moon – and with no better success.

If you do not have much education, don't worry – nobody does. If someone wanted to keep up with all the new books coming out they would have to read 2700 new books every day. And that would not even touch what is on the Internet – blogs, articles, essays. Not even the brilliant, egghead scholars know even a fraction of what is out there. And even if they could – even if you were capable of reading and understanding and digesting and recalling every word in all those 2700 books each day and everything else that is written and taught – you know how much important information you would have beyond what Scripture teaches? None.

The Bottom Line

Some of you feel like you are a dunce because you have not read very many books and you don't have much education. Suppose someone comprehended all the education and information and insight that there is, and boiled it all down to one, final bottom line? If you knew that bottom line, you would be educated, right? Here it is:

13 When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is: fear God and keep His commands

There it is. If you get that, you have got it all. You are way ahead of the guy who has five PhD's but who doesn't fear God and keep His commands. And if you need some motivation for fearing and obeying God, he gives you that in verse 14.

You Will Be Judged

14 For God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

Romans 14:10 ... we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ... 12 So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

What will it be like to have to give an account for sins you committed?

Shame

Several times in the New Testament you see Paul speaking about not being ashamed on that Day. "But I thought there was no condemnation for those who are in Christ?"

There is no condemnation, but there is accountability. And for each evil deed God requires you to give an account for, the result will be devastating shame. And if you don't think that is a big deal, you have never felt real shame. I have. I have been deeply and publically and deservedly shamed before all the people I most love and respect, and I can tell you few things in life are more excruciating. And to be shamed on that Day – before all the holy angels and all the saints and before God Himself – it is worth absolutely any cost to avoid that as much as you possibly can. What if your worst sins were put up on the screen right now? Your most vile thoughts, video footage of you at your worst – your most shameful moments? How would you feel? That is nothing compared to being shamed before the judgment seat of Christ.

Loss

And not only shame, but loss.

1 Corinthians 3:13 ...the fire will test the quality of each man's work. 14 If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. 15 If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Again, some people read that and say, “That’s fine. I don’t mind a little loss of reward as long as I still get to go to heaven.” That is an attitude of unbelief. God is warning us here about something, and the fact that He warns us means it matters. For us to say it does not matter is unbelief. Who are we kidding when we say, “Oh, I won’t mind suffering loss on that day”? We get upset when we lose our wallet. If you lost your house, would that bother you? What if you lost your job and couldn’t find work and literally ended up on the street? Would that bother you? What do you think is worth more – your job and your house, or God’s rewards on Judgment Day? If your job and house matter more to you than divine reward, that means you think little of God’s ability to reward, which means you think little of God.

Fear

So what is our response to all this?

Fear God and keep His commands.

People say, “I wonder what that word **fear** really means.” I looked it up; it means fear. We cannot reduce that down to say it only means respect. It certainly includes respect, but there are other words that mean respect that he could have used, but he chose instead to use a word that means to be so afraid that you tremble and shake. Fearing God means taking God seriously – really, really seriously. Fearing God means His assessment of you matters more to you than any other assessment, including your own. It means you would rather lose anything than sacrifice favor with Him or closeness to Him. If someone cut in front of you in traffic, and you knew that it was a car full of gang members who are known for just shooting people who irritate them - or beating them to death. If they stop at a gas station, would you get out and say something? Or would you say, “I’m not going to mess around with them”? Maybe you are trying out your new car, you want to see how it handles, how it does at high speeds – cutting a few corners on the law, but then you see a highway patrol. And you think, “Ok, I’d better not mess around right now.”

Some people are perfectly comfortable messing around with God. He gives a command, they think it over – maybe they will obey, maybe they won’t. They treat God like a peer. God is not someone to mess around with. He is a lot more dangerous than any gang member and has a lot greater authority than any police officer. Some people learn lots of information about God, but they don’t fear Him. That is worthless. If you do not fear Him, you do not even know the most basic thing about Him. If someone is the foremost expert on gravity, but he is not careful around a 1000 foot cliff – he does not know enough about gravity. Do not trifle with God. Do not ignore God – it is not safe. It is suicide.

You have to ignore such large sections of Scripture to take God lightly. God drowned the entire population of humanity because of His anger over sin. Scripture mentions the wrath of God over 600 times. A couple priests got creative in their way of offering worship to God and He burned them to ashes on the spot – right in front of everyone on the day of their ordination to the ministry. Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark when the ox stumbled and God struck him dead. God reigned fire down from heaven and burned the people of Sodom and Gomorrah alive.

“Yeah, but that’s the God of the Old Testament.”

Many people today mock the God of the Old Testament. They talk about Him like – “That was when he was going through his junior high years and was all emotional and couldn’t control himself. But now, in the New Testament, he is all about love and mercy and grace.” There is far more wrath in the New Testament than the Old Testament. There has never been a more brutal display of wrath and anger than when God the Father punished Jesus on the cross for our sins – never. And people who say there is more wrath in the Old Testament could not possibly have read the book of Revelation. That is where He pours out His wrath *unmixed*.

Revelation 14:10 he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured unmixed into the cup of his wrath.

Back then normal table wine was mixed with water – anywhere from three parts water to one part wine all the way to ten parts water to one part wine. They drank wine for hydration, so they had to water it down, and drinking it full strength was considered extreme. That is what this word “full strength” is referring to. All the previous displays of God’s wrath – Noah’s flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, all that – those were the diluted, watered-down forms of God’s wrath. Those were nothing compared to what is coming.

God is the same now as He always was. A man and wife told a lie in church in Acts 5 and God killed them where they stood. New Testament. People in Corinth started the communion meal without waiting for the poor people and God put them to death. New Testament.

Luke 12:4 I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. 5 But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.

God is not someone to trifle with.

In our flesh we have a tendency to fear everything but God. We fear man. We let our lives get shoved this direction then that direction by people’s opinions and expectations – we are scared to death to have someone look down on us. We fear our employer, because he can take away our job. We fear failure. We fear change. We fear old age, we fear sickness, we fear spiders! But we are relaxed with God. Do the math on that one – “spider, OH!! – God, ho hum.”

When I sin against God, it shows how little I know of what God is like. If I really knew who I was dealing with, no way would I do some of the things I do. Some people in this room are in love with money, but you are never tempted to get a gun and rob a bank. Why? Because you are afraid of prison. Some people in this room have murderous hearts, but you would never actually kill someone, because you have a sense that if you ever did that you would really, really be in trouble. But when it is only a sin against God – you do not have that sense. If you were standing there in the courtroom as a defendant, and you heard these words: “The verdict is life in prison without parole,” you can feel the weight of it. Or if you see someone bleeding because of what you did, or sobbing with great heaves of sorrow and pain because of you, or lying there on the ground dead because of you – then you can feel the weight of what you have done wrong. But if all you have done is sin against God – you have not hurt any people or broken any human laws – then it doesn’t feel like that big a deal. Think about that. God is holy. That should make us tremble. It bothers me in so many modern worship songs the way the word “holy” is used. It is used in ways that make me wonder if the songwriter even knows what it means. So many times they use it almost as a synonym for God’s mercy or kindness or love or patience. That is not what it is. I wish more song writers would listen through R.C. Sproul’s series on the holiness of God. God’s holiness refers to His utter purity and separation from sin. His holiness is the most dangerous thing about Him because we are sinful. God’s holiness is like the fire on the surface of the sun, and our sin is like paper. If you are made out of paper, it is not safe to go to the surface of the sun. It is good to sing about God’s holiness, but when we do, it should make us tremble. Our heads should bow. Our knees should bend when the topic of His holiness comes up. God is the Creator of the Universe. He snuffs stars out of existence. He casts His enemies into the lake of fire. And even His loving discipline of His own dear children – is awesome. He is not like the mother whose spankings don’t hurt her son anymore because he is stronger than her, so she cannot threaten him with anything that really matters to him. God knows how to get to you. He knows what is excruciating to you and what it will take to bring you to your knees if need be. You have seen God discipline other people by taking away their livelihood, and you think, “Oh, I could handle that.” Maybe you could – which is why if God ever has to discipline you He won’t use that method. He will use a method that will work, and that should be a terrifying prospect for us. Is God merciful and loving and incredibly patient? Absolutely. But do not test the limits of that patience, because when it runs out the discipline is agonizing, and it lasts much, much longer than you expect.

Running from His Displeasure

“But what about intimacy with God? You stand up there and preach all the time about loving God, drawing near to God, intimacy with God, nearness to God, delight in His presence – what happened to all that? Is that compatible with fearing God?”

Yes. Fearing God and desiring nearness to God are not one bit contradictory. In fact, it is our fear of God that makes us want to be near Him.

Jeremiah 32:40 I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will put fear of me in their hearts so they will never again turn away from me 41 I will rejoice in doing them good

Isn't that beautiful? Our fear of Him *prevents* us from turning away from Him! And here is why: because if you are really truly afraid of God's displeasure, you will run from it. You will run as hard and fast as possible from it. You will avoid it with everything you have in you. And there is only one place where you can run from God's displeasure. That is not true with other people. If you all were angry with me and decided to harm me, I could run all kinds of places. I could go to California or New York or China or Antarctica. But none of those places will protect me from God's anger. There is only one place I can run from God's displeasure, and that is right into the arms of God's love. That is the only escape. It is the only safe house. The only refuge from God's wrath is God's love. So the more I fear you, the more I might run away from you. But the more I fear God, the more I run toward Him. Fearing God's displeasure gives you the attitude that says, “I am here in the warmth and security and safety of God's love. I love it in here. It's safe; it's delightful; it's a wonderful place to be. There's a fireplace and comfortable chairs and good food and great books and great company in here. No way am I going to open that door and step outside into the sub-zero white-out blizzard of His anger that's just outside that door.” And when I do find myself having wandered out there, my one objective will be to get back inside, because God's displeasure is nothing to mess with

Obey

So what is the bottom line?

Fear God and keep His commands.

The most obvious way to express fear of God is obedience. If we take Him seriously we will not blow it off when He issues a command. And that seems so obvious – you wouldn't think there would be any need to expound on that, but amazingly, there are plenty of Bible teachers out there who seem to be against the idea of obeying God. They talk a lot about the dangers of doing things in your own strength – which sounds great. They say, “You need to live by the power of the Spirit, not your own, human effort.”¹⁰ And they say, “God's not concerned about your performance,” and “You can't earn brownie points with God.” Or they emphasize our positional righteousness in Christ and downplay the importance of behavior. Or they pit law against gospel, and they define law as any command God gives – including the command to believe. They say, “Commanding people to believe or repent or obey or anything like that – that's all law, not gospel.” People like that come up with some really ingenious arguments from all over the Bible, and they have got books and websites and arguments and all the rest. But here we have a man who is wiser and more reliable than any of those people, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and he says, “Look, the bottom line is very simple: fear God; obey God.” If someone tells you that you should not put forth effort to obey God, you have just found yourself a false teacher.

¹⁰ Those people seem to think that the opposite of living by the Spirit is effort. They make it sound like if you are putting forth effort, that is the flesh. But if you look at what the Bible says, the more you live by the Spirit the more intense your effort becomes. The more grace you get, the harder you work. If you read Galatians 5 you will see that the opposite of living by the Spirit is not effort – it is evil. The works of the flesh are not effort and energy to obey God. The works of the flesh are things like sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. Those are the marks of doing things in the flesh.

The Whole of Humanness

One last observation. Look at the last phrase of verse 13.

13 When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is: fear God and keep His commands, because this is for all humanity.

The Holman says **this is for all humanity**, your Bible might say **this is the whole duty of man** – the words **for** or **duty** are not in the Hebrew. Literally it is just, **for this is all humanity**. Fearing and obeying God is the sum total of what it means to be human. Any time I am not fearing and obeying God, I am impersonating a demon. It is a denial of my very humanity. Obeying God is not part of my life – it is my whole existence, my whole purpose, my goal, my direction, my orientation, my occupation, my identity – everything. There is nothing else to life – nothing. Very often people have the attitude that says, “It’s ok to do this, as long as I also fear and obey God.” That is the wrong way to think. It is not ok to do anything *in addition* to fearing and obeying God. We fear and obey God and that is all. If I am going to go on a vacation, it should be for the purpose of fearing and obeying God. If I drink a glass of water, or tie my shoes, or go to sleep at night, it should be out of obedience and fear of God. And any time it isn’t, I am impersonating a demon, because this is the whole of what it means to be human. Remember your Creator before calamity strikes. Trust in the reliability of God’s Word. Fear God and obey His commands because He will bring every deed into judgment. That is the secret to enjoying life.

Benediction: Psalm 2:11-12 Serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

- 1) Which attributes and truths about God are you most in need of remembering at this time in your life to prepare for coming calamity?
- 2) Are there any areas in your life where you have been acting in a way that does not take Judgment Day seriously? Or that does not take God seriously?
- 3) What would it look like for you to run from the storm of God’s displeasure into the refuge of His love?