

FEARING AND FOLLOWING GOD:  
A SERMON ON ECCLESIASTES 12:13–14  
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The Preacher in Ecclesiastes declared, “There is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness” (Eccl 2:13–14). Do you live in the dark, as one who “hates the light and does not come to the light, lest your works should be exposed” (John 3:20)? Are you authentic, or are you fake or hypocritical? “A wise man’s heart inclines him to the right, but a fool’s heart to the left,” says the Preacher (Eccl 10:2). Where do you find yourself today?

Do you fear God? Solomon said, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom”—the generator or head waters of right living (Prov 9:10; cf. 1:7; Ps 111:10). Paul declared that one of the condemnable problems among the peoples in our nations and neighborhoods is that “there is no fear of God before their eyes” (Rom 3:18). In contrast, the psalmist said, “The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love” (Ps 147:11).

Calling his followers to anticipate persecution, Jesus charged, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28). The fear of man may move us to flee, but the fear of God compels us to follow, regardless of the potential earthly dangers. You and I must fear God.

But this means that when Paul told Timothy, “God gave us a spirit *not of fear* but of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim 1:7), he must not have been referring to the fear of God that is necessary for every believer. A proper fear of the Lord brings “holiness to completion” (2 Cor 7:1); it draws us to God rather than pushes us away from him.

There are, therefore, different kinds of fear. We fear the devastating effects of fire, but with care we do not hesitate to use a stove or fire place. We fear drowning, but we still drink water, go ice fishing, and swim. There is a kind of fear that is not equal to terror but that still trembles at what could happen if we do not respect a given object. There is fear that moves us to flee, but there is also a type of fear that moves us to follow.

Abraham expressed the right kind when, after more than thirty years of walking with YHWH (cf. Gen 12:4 with 21:5) and after hearing the promise, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named” (Gen 21:12; cf. Heb 11:18), he willingly

offered up Isaac, convinced that “God was able even to raise him from the dead” (Heb 11:19; cf. Gen 22:5). But in the midst of this divine “test” (Gen 22:1), before the patriarch’s hand plunged the sacrificial knife into his son, the angel of the LORD charged him, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for *now I know that you fear God*, seeing as you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (22:12). Abraham’s fearing God grew out of a multi-decade experience of God’s power and faithfulness. His fear also related to a deep conviction that God was worth trusting, and his fear overflowed in an obedience to a command that seemed counter to other revealed purposes.

Consider also Exodus 20. After the recently redeemed Israelites encountered YHWH through the thunder, flashes of lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and Mount Sinai smoking, they came trembling to Moses, declaring, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (Exod 20:19). The Israelites wanted to run from what they perceived as danger, but Moses said, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin” (20:20). Here we see the two different types of fear. Moses said, “Don’t fear in a way that moves you to flee, but fear in a way that pushes you to follow.”

God’s revealed purpose of the old covenant was that the people’s encounter with his greatness through word and presence would spark a fear that would lead to holiness. Thus Moses declared, “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul?” (10:12; cf. 6:13). The sad reality, however, is that the nation as a whole did not fear God, and therefore they did not follow him but followed the course of this world to their own destruction. Nevertheless, the Lord promised that he would instill within the members of the new covenant a proper regard for his greatness. “I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me” (Jer 32:40). The question I want you to answer today is, Do you know this persevering fear of the Lord that leads you to not turn from him? Are you fearing God today in a way that moves you to follow him, looking at things that are pure, speaking in ways that are loving, acting in ways that are just. Or does your lack of fear give you a sense of freedom to sin?

Turn with me to Eccl 12:13–14, which stands as the conclusion to one of the Old Testament’s books of wisdom. I want to consider today the meaning and lasting significance of the sage’s final assertion.

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (12:13–14)

I considered just stopping the sermon here and letting you and I just meditate on these words. Convinced, however, that faith comes from hearing (Rom 10:17), I want to unpack them within their context.

“The end of the matter; all has been heard” (12:13). The narrator here declares, “I have come to the end of all I set out to recount.” In this book, the author includes for us the words of a Preacher, probably Solomon, whom I believe was both a godly sage and realist. The narrator writes in 12:9–10, “Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.” Many have questioned the orthodoxy of the Preacher, but the inspired narrator tells us here that a careful reader will find words of both joy and truth.

And what conclusion should we draw from the Preacher’s instruction in 1:2–12:8? That God’s revealed purpose for every human is that they would fear God and follow him. Whether brown or peach, pauper or prince, professor or student—the whole of humanity is called to *fear and follow God* who created everything and for whom everything exists (Rom 11:36; Heb 2:10). I want to tackle this text in three parts, working backwards to forwards: (1) Why we must fear; (2) Whom we must fear; (3) What it means to fear.

### **Why We Must Fear**

Why must we fear God? Verse 14 says, “For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccl 12:14). Fearing and following the Lord in the present is no light matter, because whether or not we fear and pursue him today impacts our future tomorrow. God has established a day when he will bring a reckoning, judging, as Paul says, “the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (Rom 2:16). Jesus declared, “On the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak” (Matt 12:36). Every evil jibe, every bit of gossip, every complaint or curse or lie—he knows all, and he will deal with all. Jesus said, “The Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done” (Matt 16:27). Or as Paul said, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor 5:10; cf. Rom 2:6–8).

Now, this judgment according to works is not the ground or foundation on which we will enjoy our future inheritance. No, our future inheritance is grounded solely on Christ's justifying act. But our own deeds today supply necessary proof of our life and secure our reward. Hear Paul's words in 1 Cor 3:11–15:

For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Cor 3:11–15)

The Lord will account for every outward act and secret thought, every response or feeling, whether good or evil. As the Preacher says in Eccl 3:17, "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work." Far too often in this life, "in the place of righteousness there is wickedness" (3:16), and there are true God-followers for whom life goes bad, and there are rebels for whom life goes well (7:15; 8:14). Nevertheless, the Preacher believed that "though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God" (8:12–13). Fearing God today gives hope for eternal life tomorrow.

True God-fearers are free to delight in this world, but we must do so ever with an eye on the future: "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment" (11:9).

The New Testament regularly warns of how seriously God will treat sin, and the authors use these warnings to generate fear and to motivate following in those who truly are in Christ. Hear and heed as I read some of these texts.

- "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell" (Matt 6:29; cf. Rev 2:22–23).
- "If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt 6:15).

- “If we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us” (2 Tim 2:12; cf. Rom 11:22).
- “If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (Heb 10:26–27).

Jesus died to cleanse us from our sins—“there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). But he also died to free us from sin’s power: “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (8:13). This is not a perfection over night, but a true redirection over a lifetime. Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt 7:21; cf. 25:41–43, 45). So I say to you with Paul, “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9–10). Paul meant these words, and he followed them with the reminder: “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (6:11). We fear God because he does and will take sin seriously.

### **Whom We Must Fear**

So whom must we fear? The “whole duty of man” in Eccl 12:13 is that we would “fear *God* and keep his commandments.” *Elohim* is the most common designation for “God” in the book, occurring 40x in the twelve chapters. The name “Yahweh” never appears, but we do find two other telling designations: “Creator” in 12:1 and “one Shepherd,” the source of wisdom in 12:11. The Preacher goes to great lengths to identify the expansive nature of God’s creative power and his justice as the one who has cursed and will judge the world.

Look first at 11:5: “As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of *God who makes everything*.” The particular verb form here expresses imperfective aspect, portraying God as one who even now is in progress of generating reality as we know it. The author of Hebrew says that right now, moment by moment, the very Son of God is upholding “the universe by the word of his power” (Heb 1:3). If he were to stop speaking, this pastor and this pulpit and those pews and you people would all stop existing. We are to fear the God who makes everything.

In Ecclesiastes, “everything” relates to all life and every matter or activity that happens in space and time. The rising and going down of the sun, the blowing of the wind, and the flow of water—all of these chapter 1 declares are part of the “everything” (1:5–7). With this, “for *everything* there is a season... a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build” (3:1–3). Our weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing, seeking and losing, keeping and casting, tearing and sewing, loving and hating, warring and making peace (3:4–8)—all are part of the everything that God makes.<sup>1</sup>

How big is the God that you believe in? Do you believe with Paul that he “gives to all mankind life and breath and *everything*” (Acts 17:25)? Do you really believe that “from him and through him and to him are *all things*” (Rom 11:36)? In fearing God we fear the One who is the fountainhead of all reality, who is the source of all beauty and creativity, of all faith and hope, of all justice and love. And he is also the one who pulls back light and warmth, allowing darkness and cold to provide a backdrop that allows us to see and savor his greatness and supremacy all the more.

Look now at Eccl 7:13–14. We read, “Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.” When the Vikings win, be joyful; and when the faucet leaks, or when you lose your job, or when the relationship breaks or the cancer strikes or your child dies, remember that no pleasure or pain in this world is random: “God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him” (7:14). This is BIG GOD theology.

“Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?” (Exod 4:11). “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand” (Deut 32:39). “I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things” (Isa 45:7). Do you fear this God? Do you recognize how radically dependent you are on him—for every breath, every choice, every expression of faith, every right act?

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<sup>1</sup> In this book people like you and me exist not randomly but only because God gives us life (5:18; 8:15; 9:9) including a spirit (12:7; cf. 3:21). God also orders the very details of our daily existence. He gives toilsome work (1:13; 3:10). He alone bestows “wisdom, knowledge, and joy” (cf. 12:11). To some he gives “wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them” (5:19), but to others he gives provision and praise but does not add to it contentment (6:1–2).

Look again at Eccl 7:14: “In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.” Notice that the inspired Preacher believes God is absolutely in charge of every joy and challenge in this life and that he is convinced that God is guiding the universe in such a way that you and I don’t know what is coming next (cf. 8:17). James said, “You do not know what tomorrow will bring.... For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.... You ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that’” (Jas 4:14–15; cf. Rom 11:33). If the Lord wills, I’ll finish out this semester. If the Lord wills, I’ll defeat my battle with lust. If the Lord wills, I will keep trusting him and seeking him. Oh, God, will such things for me, for us! Help us seek you, and let us find you.

### **What It Means to Fear**

We know why we should fear, and we better grasp whom we must fear. What, then, does it mean to fear God? Here is my definition based on what we have seen so far. *The fear of the Lord is a necessary and appropriate feeling of concern or awe before God that leads to wise living.* What induces such fear? Recognizing God’s incomparable greatness and believing that our future well-being as sinners is fully dependent on his mercy both to declare us righteous and to empower us to follow him.

We have already seen how the Preacher joins fear and wise living, which together contrast with wickedness and sin. The righteous are not sinless, for “there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (7:20). Instead, the righteous are those who, in the midst of their failures, still fear God and seek to keep his commandments (12:14). Fearing God opens the door for future well-being (8:12), and “wisdom preserves the life of his who has it” (7:12). “It will not be well with the wicked, ... because he does not fear before God” (7:13).

Let’s now turn to Eccl 3:14: “I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.” Whether working good or bad, making straight or crooked, one of God’s revealed goals is to move us to fear him. By fearing we recognize and celebrate that the level of his greatness means that his actions—which include everything—are permanent, complete, and secure—they endure, they need no additions, and they cannot be altered. Fear is a humble submission to the bigness of God.

But why would God be orchestrating all reality in order to move us to fear him? Along with the fact that he is simply worthy of our awe, we learn in 8:12 that “it will be well with those who fear God.” In all pain and pleasure, God is working in love, seeking to generate fear, for “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9:10) and “wisdom preserves the life of him who has it” (Eccl 7:12). While it is true that in this life “there is nothing to be gained under the sun” (2:11), the Preacher could still assert in light of eternity that “there is more gain in wisdom than in folly” (2:13). We know that God “opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:5), so we should see the pleasures, pains, and limited nature of our abilities in this life as orchestrated for our good. The psalmist reflected: “[The LORD] covers the heavens with clouds; he prepares rain for the earth; he makes grass grow on the hills. He gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens that cry. His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love” (Ps 147:8–11). The more we “remember our Creator” (Eccl 12:1), grasping properly the object of our fear, the better we will grasp the meaning of fear itself.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, you will recall Paul’s charge in Phil 2:12–13: “Work out your own salvation *with fear* and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Paul believed “God ... makes everything” (Eccl 11:5), so every work of faith was a “thanks be to God” kind of obedience (Rom 6:17). We are to *work* out our salvation, but we do so *with fear*, knowing that apart from God in Christ we “can do nothing” (John 15:5). Everything is grace, and this should make us tremble. We struggle “with all his energy that he powerfully works within [us]” (Col 1:29). Paul said, “*By the grace of God* I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though *it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me*” (1 Cor 15:10; cf. Rom 15:18). God’s grace did not make Paul’s work unnecessary; it made his work possible (cf. Eph 2:10)! And this wise working was generated in the context of a necessary and appropriate feeling of concern or awe before God.

So, brothers and sisters, “Let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:28–29). I urge you, “Fear God and keep his commandments, ... for God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccl 12:13–14).