

“Fearing God” Pt 4

Fearing God
Various Scriptures
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Doug: Okay, let’s begin. Let me open us with a prayer.

Our God, we thank You for allowing us to gather together. Please be with us as we understand what it means to fear You.

This is lesson 4, which is a continuation of where we were last week, fearing the written word of God and how God speaks to us. This is literally God’s voice. Again, when you think about that, as we said, it’s so easy to perhaps look at the Scriptures at times and just read them as words on paper. But they’re much, much more than just words on paper.

To the Puritans the Scriptures as a whole and in all of its parts were literally the utterance of God. It was God’s voice put down in writing for us. Thomas Watson, one of the famous Puritans, said, *“Think in every line you read that God is speaking to you.”*

You know, this approach to the Bible presupposes that we fear God, that we have an awe and reverence for His holiness, a unique reverence and wonder for His holiness.

What Scripture says God is saying. The writer to the Hebrews, this passage that many of us know, says in chapter 4 verse 12, *“The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the hart.”* You know, that’s not just words on a page, because when we come to the Scriptures we’re coming before God—living and active, sharp, piercing. We should fear. We should fear with awe and reverence when we come to the living word of God.

You know, in review last week we began to see this. And we began to see that the Bible taught that the written word of God is to be feared. And we talked about our approach to Scripture. Again, do we recognize God’s word? Or do we casually regard it as something like other books?

Now we’re not going to review every single verse that we went through last week. And the way Bruce has this set up there’s a lot of overlap between lessons 3 and 4. We won’t look at all those verses. But the key message that we learned from those verses that we went through last week is that in the Scripture God teaches us about why we should fear Him. Or come before Him with awe and reverence. Again, it’s as if God Himself were speaking in His written word, and it should be feared.

Now if we look at those first verses, Psalm 34:11 and Psalm 111:10, again Psalm 34:11:

*“Come, my children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.”*

How did the Israelites listen to God? They read His word. They read what they had at that time as God’s word, what we know as the Pentateuch. At that point that is what they had as God’s word, those first five books of the Bible. And he said, “Listen,” because it wasn’t just to read it; it was to listen, not just because someone was reading it to them,

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but to listen because they were the very words of God. And they teach us the fear of God, right?

And Psalm 111 verse 10 was cut off on the page that was sent out this week for Lesson 4. The verse was cut off, but I’ll read it in full.

*“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
All of His precepts have good understanding;
To Him belongs eternal praise.”*

To God belongs eternal praise.

So again, as we fear God we understand more about Him. As we understand more about Him we fear Him more in awe and reverence—again this is the fear that we’re talking about. And that cycle continues.

Scripture is the rule and director of our fear or awe of God. Again, this verse from Deuteronomy; we’ll read that one—chapter 6, verses 1-3. *“These are the commands, decrees and laws that the LORD your God directed to me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you and your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live, by keeping all His decrees and commands that I give you, so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, O Israel and be careful to obey, so that it may go well with you, and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you.”*

So again, what this passage is teaching us is that our understanding and obedience to the Lord’s instructions in the Scriptures will be the very thing that increases in us a holy fear of God, awe and reverence of His majesty. And of course that includes His word. So when we come to His word with awe and reverence, again that cycle continues. So we need to be in the Word.

I shared last week this sermon that I heard last year at some point. I wish I could remember exactly where it was. I remember who it was; I wish I could remember the occasion. Now the preacher was challenging us to be more concerned with God’s word than what other people write about God’s word. He was talking about how oftentimes we enter into a habit of reading devotionals, where there’s one little passage at the top and then three paragraphs about the passage. And we spend more time in the paragraphs about the passage than the passage itself.

We’ve got to reverse that. Not that devotions are bad, but we’ve got to spend more time in God’s word ourselves directly. We need to rethink our priorities, right?

And then letter C., the reasons why we fear the written Word. First and foremost, they are the words of God. How many of us, in whatever tradition we happen to worship, after the Scriptures have been read, have some kind of call and response from the reader of the Scriptures to the congregation. “The word of the Lord.” And we often respond, “Thanks be to God.”

Those words can so easily roll off of our lips on Sunday mornings when we hear a passage read, and the reader says, “The word of God.” And we just intuitively say, “Thanks be to God.” We need to pause and think about what’s being stated there. This is

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the word of God. And that’s why we’re saying, “Thanks be to God,” because He has given us His word; He’s speaking to us.

Now item A. in your outline. I’m not sure what that passage is all about and why it’s in here; I’ll be honest with you. I looked at Exodus chapter 2 verse 4. I couldn’t put it into context, and when I was talking to Bruce last night I decided not to bother him with the details and ask him that question. But we’ll look at this other passage from Habakkuk.

And this really catches me—Habakkuk chapter 3 verse 16. He’s hearing God’s word. *“I heard and my heart pounded; my lips quivered at the sound. Decay crept into my bones and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.”*

So in this case Habakkuk heard God’s word with fear and trembling because it was the very word of God. It wasn’t necessarily what he wanted to hear. But he’s going to wait patiently on it with fear and trembling because it is God’s word; he can trust in that Word.

And Item 2 under that heading is *because of the subject matter.* We looked at that passage from John, chapter 12 verse 48. This is Jesus speaking. *“There is a judge for the one who rejects Me and does not accept My words. The very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day.”*

God’s word is His own self-disclosure to us, His divine plan for redeeming the creation and the judgment for those who don’t obey. So this subject matter is the most important subject matter in the universe. It’s the most important thing that we’re ever going to look at, that we’re ever going to encounter—the plan of redemption and the reality that there is judgment for those that don’t obey the Lord.

And #3, *because of the truth and faithfulness in it.* This is unique. This is the unique power to grab hold of the human heart and turn that human heart to the love of Christ. There’s something unique and true and faithful about God’s word that would cause us to fear it; it’s so powerful. Again I won’t read all of these verses, but I will read the verse from Matthew.

Again, Jesus speaking. *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”* They will never pass away. Regardless of the political climate, regardless of any persecution the church faces, regardless of how our neighbors may scoff, the word of God will not pass away. That should cause us to pause with awe and reverence.

And then #4 in our outline. Again, we’re still reviewing the things that we talked about at more length last week. It’s *because all transgression and sin begins at wandering away from the word of God.* We should fear God’s word because that is the one thing that will lead us to holy obedience. Any other instruction is going to lead us away and cause us to wander, right?

Thomas Cranmer who was an English reformer and martyr said, *“Whoever is diligent to read, and in his heart print,”*—so imprint on your heart,—*“what he reads, that great affection to the transitory things of this world shall be diminished in him. And the great desire of heavenly things that be therein promised of God shall increase in him.”*

So when we print God’s word on our hearts the things of the world start to fade away, and the things of God increase in our hearts. And therefore we can be obedient.

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Now our regular exposure to Scripture really works to change the most basic desires that we have. The Scripture has the power to work through the Holy Spirit and re-shape our affections and transform our actions. So we’re not just thinking right; we act right. So we think right, we act right, and then it will feel right.

We’ve talked about that so often over the years, whether in the men’s Bible study or the Thursday Bible study; we’ve all talked about that. But through the power of the Holy Spirit the Scripture has the power to do this, to cause us to think differently, so we will act so that not only are our actions but our affections and our feelings will be changed. But apart from the very word of God, we will sin; we’re going to sin.

Now I’m going to read a passage that is not in your outline, at least I don’t think it is—Exodus 20, verses 18-20. So this is when they’re delivered from the Egyptians and so God is with them. And now He’s delivering His law to them. In chapter 20 He’s delivering the Ten Commandments. Moses has come down from the mountain.

“Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning, and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled. And they stood far off and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us and we will listen. But do not let God speak to us, lest we die.’

“Moses said to the people, ‘Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of Him may be before you, that you may not sin.’

“The people stood afar off while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.”

So what Moses is saying is, “Hey, don’t be afraid. That fear in you is going to help you to be obedient. That’s why God has given us a law, a law that we on our own can never fulfill.” But by God’s grace through Jesus Christ’s sacrifice on the cross it has been fulfilled for us, and we can obey. So we should fear.

So all of that is in review of what we looked at last week. But we’re going to move on now to II on your outline: *trembling*. We need to be trembling at His word.

Think about this: trembling at God’s word, physically trembling at God’s word. When we hear or read God’s word, how do we react? How do we react to that?

Charles Spurgeon said, *“The highest joy which yields to mortal men is attained with a reverent awe in holy trembling before God. If the believer went beyond the enjoyment of the literal word, and saw the Incarnate Word Himself in all the splendor of His Person, he would tremble still more.”*

We’ve often talked about us seeing the God behind the Scriptures, looking at the majesty of God’s attributes that are revealed in the Scripture. That’s what Spurgeon is talking about here. When we read God’s word—not just the literal words on the page, but when we see how God is showing Himself to us in His character in those words and He’s putting Himself on display,—that should cause us to tremble, right? It’s so important that it would cause us to tremble.

Now I don’t know about you, but that’s not my normal response when I hear God’s word. And that causes me to look in the mirror and challenge my own heart, and to say, “Am I thinking right about God’s word? Am I really thinking about it right?”

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So we come to this passage in Isaiah that we’ll spend the rest of our time on. And Bruce in the outline has just a couple verses from Isaiah, but I’m actually going to read a few more. I’m going to read chapter 66, verses 1-5—not just verses 2-3, but 1-5. That will put it into a little more context for us. So this is again chapter 66 of Isaiah,. Starting at verse 1.

“Thus says the LORD:

‘Heaven is My throne,

The earth is My footstool.

What is the house that you would build for Me?

And what is the place of My rest?

All these things My hand has made,

So all these things came to be,’ declares the LORD.”

So He’s saying “What kind of house can you build Me? The whole universe is Mine; I made it all. Heaven is My throne; the earth is My footstool. What kind of house did you build for Me? Anything you did I did through you, right? I made them all to be.”

And verse 2:

“‘All these things My hand has made,

And so all these things came to be,’ declares the LORD.

‘But this is the one to whom I will look:

He who is humble and contrite in spirit,

And trembles at My word.

He who slaughters an ox

Is like one who kills a man.

He who sacrifices a lamb

Like one who breaks a dog’s neck.

He who presents a grain offering

Like one who offers pig’s blood.

He who makes a memorial offering of frankincense

Like one who blesses an idol.

These have chosen their own ways,

And their soul delights in their abominations.

I also will choose harsh treatment for them

And bring their fears upon them,

Because when I called, no one answered;

When I spoke, they did not listen.

But they did what was evil in My eyes,

And chose that in which I did not delight.

Hear the word of the LORD,

You who tremble at His word:

Your brothers who hate you

And cast you out for My name’s sake, and have said,

‘Let the LORD be glorified,

That we may see your joy.’

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But it is they who shall be put to shame.’”

Those are verses 1-5 of Isaiah 66. And you know, the context here is as Isaiah says, getting people away from their resting in the glorious temple they built and their outward performance. This is all about our (and again, I say our), because while this was written to Israel hundreds of years before the life of Jesus, about five hundred years, this is still about us. This is about our misdirected affections and blindness about the reality of who God really is. Even the word of God is given to Isaiah. It reflects the cynicism that settles in our hearts, based upon our own self-righteous hearts.

*“”Your brothers who hate you
And cast you out for My name’s sake have said,
‘Let the LORD be glorified,
That we may see your joy.’”*

That’s cynicism. He’s parroting right back to us our own hearts that we experience so often, right? So that’s the context.

Now Isaiah shows us that there are things that are outward shows, but it’s really a wicked life underneath. So letter B. in this section, these four expressions.

Now it’s interesting if you look at these.

*“He who slaughters an ox
Is like one who kills a man.
He who sacrifices a lamb
Like one who breaks a dog’s neck.
He who presents a grain offering
Like one who offers pig’s blood.
He who makes a memorial offering of frankincense
Like one who blesses an idol.”*

Think about that. Slaughters an ox, sacrifices a lamb, presents a grain offering, makes a memorial offering of frankincense. All of these things, all of these actions are part of the Mosaic ceremonial law that was given by God Himself. These were not actions that were made up by the people. These are actions that are codified in God’s own law, right?

But the attitude of the heart is wrong. And as a result these expressions cease to be loving obedience to God. They become acts of wickedness, abominations to God. So the very things that God commanded His people to do because of their hearts become abominations before Him.

Again, they’re not doing something that they made up on their own; they’re doing what God commanded. But that doesn’t work if our hearts are wrong. So false faith proves to be helpless before everything it hopes to avoid. Our false faith ends up suffering from the very things that it is seemingly opposed to. False faith lacks trembling before God. And it is equally as bad as outright and flagrant sins like murder and idolatry that are mentioned in verse 3, right? It’s apostasy.

So the very good things that God gave us because of their lack of understanding, their lack of coming before the Lord with trembling, turn into abominations. And they are every bit as bad. It says that it is like one who kills a man. It’s like one who practices

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idolatry. Those are all serious offenses before the Lord. So the offense of the attitude of our heart is just as serious; it’s just as serious.

Conversely in this passage, we have these qualifications of one for whom God has high regard. And there are three things that the Lord tells us: “one who is humble or poor in spirit, contrite in spirit, and trembles at My word.” So we’ll look at each of these three now.

Think about *poor in spirit*. My guess is that just about everybody on this call, if they’ve been involved in this Bible study or the men’s Bible study, at some point we studied the Beatitudes with Bruce. And you hopefully all remember what *poor in spirit* is all about, right?

Think of Matthew chapter 5 verse 3—the Beatitudes: “The poor in spirit; blessed are they.” You know, it’s being aware of our own spiritual bankruptcy, our brokenness.

Think about chapter 18 of Luke, verses 9-14.

Transcriber’s Note: Luke 9:9-14, ESV. *“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.*

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’

“But the tax collector standing far off would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breasts, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’

“I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Doug: The Pharisee and the tax collector, right? The Pharisee comes in with lots of pomp and circumstance into the temple to worship. But the tax collector comes in with complete abject humility, not even willing to lift his head, but saying, “Woe is me, a sinner.” And it’s pride contrasted with humility. So “poor in spirit: is one of the qualifications for which God has high regard.

So we have to watch out for pride. And the sin of pride is pervasive and dangerous, especially within the church where our actions and our activities can seem good or altruistic on the surface. But whatever leadership roles we have, whatever ministry we’re a part of, whatever missions trips we’ve taken, we’ve got to be careful that those don’t become matters of pride, right? We need poverty of spirit and humility desperately—a deep-seated sense of our sinful state, and the realization that we can do nothing beyond the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We’ve got to be really, really careful even within the church, because again, these were all people in the church that Isaiah was talking about, doing the things that the church said they should be doing. But God saw them as heinous as murder and idolatry because they weren’t trembling at His word. They really didn’t take His word seriously as God speaking to them directly. So it didn’t rest in their hearts and it didn’t change them, right?

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I’ll give you my own example. The folks from Thursday probably heard me comment on this before. It’s something that Bruce and I talk about and that we both struggle with.

My own example is wondering, you know what? Am I doing a good job teaching? Do people like when I teach?

And I had to remind myself that I’m not teaching for people to like it. I’m teaching to express the truth of God, and not count heads—how many people showed up, or how many people didn’t show up. But am I being obedient to God’s truths?

But you have to be really careful, because it’s so easy to slip into “Yeah, but I wonder if they liked it.” So there’s just one example from my own life, right?

John Owen, one of the great Puritan divines, said, *“This may be fixed as a common principle of Christianity, namely, that constant and fervent prayer for divine assistance in the Holy Spirit is such an indispensable means for attaining the knowledge of the mind of God in Scripture, as without it all other means will not avail.”*

So what he’s saying is that this is one of the most common things in Christianity, that we have to pray, pray, pray for divine assistance from the Holy Spirit to understand the mind of God in Scripture, because nothing else is going to allow us to really understand what God is speaking to us. Again, we’re hearing God’s word. And if we understand that then we will tremble. We’ve got to be poor in spirit. Our own efforts are never going to allow us to hear God speaking in the Bible. otherwise they’re just going to be pages or words on paper, or pages in a book.

We’ve got to be like that tax collector when we come to hear God. And we have to say, “Be merciful to me, a sinner. Help me to understand what you’re speaking to me through Your word. Help me to tremble before Your word.” That’s the approach that’s to be characterized by our awe-struck wonder, that God would so graciously pursue us with His love. So we’ve got to receive the Scripture with reverence and with joy.

All right. The other idea is being *contrite of heart*. And they’re similar. But think of David in Psalm 51, the most famous of the penitential Psalms. In David’s prayer of confession over his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah her husband he says, “Before You alone, Lord, have I sinned.”

Somehow the Holy Spirit worked in David’s life to make him aware that his sin was before God alone. Everything else is secondary. When we think of it our lives are lived before an audience of One. I wish I knew who originally said that; I’ve heard it often.

But that’s how we need to position our hearts so we understand that what we do we do only before God. And that should cause us to tremble, right?

Isaiah 57 verse 15. Let me turn to that. That’s also not in your outline either. But let me read it really quickly, because it says the same thing. Again he’s talking about the contrite of heart.

“For thus says the LORD, the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy:” So this is God, the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy.

*“I dwell in a high and holy place,
And also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,
To revive the spirit of the lowly,*

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To revive the heart of the contrite.”

So now what God is saying is that those are the folks that He dwells with. And He will pull them out of their lowliness of spirit. He’s going to take us away from the futility of our sin. And again we can’t do it on our own. God says He will do it.

There’s a sense of mortification here. And that word is not used very often. It’s this idea of mortifying our sins.

Again I’ll quote John Owen who wrote, *“The choicest believes who are assuredly freed from the condemning power of sin should also make it their business all of their days to mortify the indwelling power of sin.”*

So it’s not that we haven’t been forgiven of our sin. But oftentimes there’s this residual power of sin at work in our lives. And the same sins crop up at various times over and over. We need to do the extra work of constantly praying, “Lord, I know I’m forgiven. But take this sin away from me. Put me in a place where I would not sin like that. Put people around me to protect me from sinning like that,” whatever it might be. We’re praying and recognizing in fighting that that sin wouldn’t come back and continue to haunt us.

So it’s not about being forgiven, right? *“The choicest believers that are assuredly freed from the condemning power of sin”*—we’re free from the condemnation. *“Should also make it their business to mortify the indwelling power of sin.”*

When we know we’ve been forgiven, free from condemnation, we continue to pray. We continue to confess and wrestle with our sin, to change our behavior.

J. I. Packer has written really well on this subject. If you find anything he’s done, it’s someone more contemporary with this idea of mortifying sins. *“We fear the Lord in His word not because we dislike it, but because we cannot stand to realize that we are so far away from the standard it sets.”* That causes that contrite and lowly spirit, and causes us to wrestle with our sin and prevent it from gaining the upper hand.

And the last item here is *trembling*. The writer in Isaiah says, *“He who is humble and contrite of spirit, And trembles at My word.”*

So it suggests again this pious reverence for God’s word, an eagerness to obey.

Again, it’s not in your outline. But I would take us to the book of Ezra chapter 9 verse 4, and chapter 10 verse 3. I’ll read those for us. So this is Ezra. The Israelites have been taken captive to Babylon. And now they have been freed when Cyrus defeated the Babylonians and they’re allowed to go back to the Promised Land. And they’re trying to clean up the mess that had become of Jerusalem and the surrounding territory. And that’s the time that Ezra the prophet was writing.

And he says in verse 4 of chapter 9, *“Then all who trembled at the words of God,”* (and so Ezra brought the Scriptures back to the people), *“all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice.”*

So they got back. They heard the word of God and realized how faithless they had been, and they trembled. Now some folks have obeyed, some folks haven’t. And these folks that trembled at the word of God realized, “Wow! There’s a bunch of us that were

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really faithless.” And they were just appalled by this. But it was those who trembled at the word of God who had the sensitivity of spirit to see what was going wrong.

And then in chapter 10 verse 3 Ezra writes: *“Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children.”*

And so a bunch of the Israelites had taken foreign wives; it was against God’s command. *“According to the counsel of the LORD and those who tremble at the command of our God. And let it be done according to the law.”*

So again the writer is highlighting that those who trembled at the word of God were prevented from taking part in this sin of marrying outside of the house of Israel, taking pagan spouses for themselves.

All right. So it’s this idea of trembling at God’s word and protecting us again, and then wanting to obey. In both cases here in Ezra those that are trembling at His word are eager to obey.

You know, we think about this in the context of our 21st-century confident selves in this confident 21st century that we live in. We have this attitude of accomplishment, and that there’s nothing before us that we can’t do. And conversely, is there anything that would cause us to tremble? We seem to be so confident in ourselves.

Now granted, maybe the Coronavirus has caused us to rethink our confidence. And maybe there are a few things that we should be trembling at. Maybe that’s what God is trying to teach us through all this.

But we often act as if we were masters of the universe in today’s world, and all that is within it. You know, we’ve piled scientific discovery upon discovery. Yet before God Almighty as revealed in His word we should tremble.

You know, during the Reformation people gave their lives in obedience to God’s word. Might that cause us to tremble if we were reading God’s very word, when the Word could be used to condemn us to death, knowing that every line God speaks to you in Scripture may be a call for you to renounce the world? In the face of death that’s a level of trembling before God’s word that it’s hard for me to fathom, quite honestly. It’s very hard for me to fathom.

And we’re blessed to live in this moment and time and place where we’re not persecuted for our faith. But many, many in the world are. Yet they tremble at God’s word and are excited to be obedient to it with reverence and with awe, knowing that what they are hearing, God speaking to them, could be so real and so awe-inspiring that it could condemn them to death, right? Yet they can stand with confidence in front of that persecution because they know it is God Himself speaking to them. Even though it’s that Word that might condemn them in the eyes of their persecutors, they can stand with fear and trembling in confidence before God’s word.

Some of you have heard me mention Ben Kwashi before, the Anglican archbishop of Nigeria. There are many horrors that Ben and his family have had to face, and this man will not back down. I don’t know how tall Ben is—five foot two or three. He is a lion in his confidence and boldness to proclaim the truth of God. And there’s a man that does tremble before the word of God.

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I have seen Ben preach. And when he’s reading the Scriptures that he’s going to preach on I can see him tremble, because he knows this is the word of truth. But he also knows that it can be a word of condemnation. Yet with loving obedience he proclaims the truth in spite of the death threats that he’s had, in spite of his wife being brutally raped by Islamic extremists, in spite of his property being destroyed, in spite of neighbors being murdered, in spite of the fact that he now has hundreds of orphans that he and his wife have adopted. Ben and Gloria have adopted these orphans and made them their children because their families have been murdered and martyred. In spite of all that he boldly proclaims the truth.

That’s a persecution I can’t imagine, but he lives under it every day. We don’t read about it in the press here. But every day villages are being wiped out. So again we can be thankful that we can live where we can meet like this and not live in fear.

Read what it says here in Isaiah. Let me turn back to that passage in Isaiah. Let’s see; let me get to that Isaiah 66 passage.

“Thus says the LORD:

‘Heaven is My throne,

The earth is My footstool.

What is the house that You will build for Me?

What is the place of My rest?

All these things My hand has made.”

He’s comparing. He’s using His own temple that He told the people to build for Him. He’s saying, “You know what? These contrite, poor in spirit people that tremble at My word, they mean more to Me than that temple. They’re more important than that temple.”

We saw all the instructions for it. We saw Saul build this temple in 2 Chronicles. Think of that. This temple that He commanded, that God commanded and initiated, the splendor of that temple, God is saying, “You know what?” This is the temple that God came down to and filled with His glory. It was filled with His glory, right? He’s saying, “These poor in spirit, contrite people who tremble at My word, they’re more important than that temple.”

In fact God says that He prefers them to His temple. He says that “those are the three qualifications that cause these people to be more important in My eyes than that structure that I commanded you to build,” because they’re not focused on the structure or the form. They’re focused on the Spirit, right? That’s what they’re focused on. conversely, those who should have those three qualifications but don’t are focused more on the structure and less on the Spirit.

Again this lands close to home, this contrast that He’s making in Isaiah, because how often do we get caught up in our structure, our building? You know, we raise all sorts of money. We wring hands over maintaining our buildings. And we fret over the capital campaigns to raise money for them. And then we go into debt to pay for them. And this is a little bit of an aside, but all of that very easily and oftentimes does distract us from ministry. We have to be very careful.

You know, sharing the gospel is what it’s about. We sometimes get hung up on our buildings. I’m not saying that buildings are bad. But oftentimes they can be a real

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distraction from that humility of spirit and that contriteness of heart and the ability to tremble at God’s word. We’re too caught up in the trappings. It can be our liturgy as well. But buildings are a big part of it.

I’ll tell you. In 1982 I was doing mission work in South Africa. It was during the height of apartheid. And we got snowed into one of the ghettos. And at that time it was one of the worst ghettos in the world. There was only one water spigot for every 300 people. There were bodies lying in the streets.

And we got snowed in for Sunday morning worship by the pastor that invited us to come to South Africa. And he just went in and he conducted worship. And this building that was our worship space, the church that these people had, was small. It was made of cardboard and corrugated tin. It looked like everything you don’t want to see. It smelled like everything you don’t want to smell.

And I will go to my grave never remembering a worship service as magnificent as that, because I was put to shame by the poverty of spirit, the contriteness of heart, the trembling in God’s word of these people who invited us to worship with them. To see the way the Holy Spirit moved in that place when they lifted up their voices in song was amazing. And it made me realize that buildings don’t matter to the Lord. It’s our attitude of heart that matters. But we oftentimes get hung up on the buildings. Or as I said, we might get hung up on other things. And maybe in our mainline denominational problems God is taking us to task for that, because oftentimes we’ve lost our buildings in these days. And maybe God is trying to get our attention and saying, “Stop worrying about the structure.” Just like he says in Isaiah, that’s not what’s really important.

And also quickly here, verse 2 also says that the Lord is going to look upon these people with esteem, or care for these people with these three attributes. I’m reading from the English Standard Version here. And it says, “*I will look upon.*” I believe the NIV says, “*I will esteem these people.*” Some versions say “care.”

What’s being conveyed here is a personal care, an attentiveness to these people. So not only does He say that they’re better than the temple, but “I’m going to care for them. I’m going to care for these people that tremble before My word. I’m going to make sure that they are cared for.”

So those people that are poor in spirit, contrite and who tremble, those same people who the world scoffs at God will care for, right? They don’t need to worry when the world scoffs at them. He’s going to sustain them.

Oh, that we would be those same people, so awe-struck by God speaking to us in Scripture! Pray that we would have ears to hear His voice as He speaks to us in Scripture.

Now if we don’t see the divine majesty of the Lord in His word and tremble, just as Ezekiel did, as Daniel did, as Habakkuk did, as John did when he saw the Lord and trembled, then we need to look at our hearts, right? Something is wrong. And I need to say this to myself as much as to anybody. We need to look in the mirror and say, hold on. Am I turning my heart towards the Lord so that I would tremble when I hear His voice spoken through the Scriptures?

Again I’ll quote Spurgeon. “*There is divine royalty about every sentence of Scripture which the true believer feels and recognizes, and therefore trembles before it.*” Divine

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royalty about every sentence of Scripture, which the true believer feels and recognizes, and therefore trembles before it. We need to take that to heart.

So as we began to discuss last week in lesson 3 and continued this week in lesson 4, on how we understand the word of God properly, as Scripture itself reveals, it should cause us to come to the Bible with a profound sense of awe and reverence.

J. I. Packer in his book *The Quest for Godliness* writes: “*He who would interpret Scripture,*” (and you can equate that with hearing God speak through His word), “*He who interprets Scripture aright therefore must be a man or woman of a reverent, humble, prayerful, teachable and obedient spirit. Otherwise, however tightly his mind may be stuffed with notions, he or she will never reach any understanding of Scriptural realities.*”

So we can have all the facts. But if we don’t understand that this is God speaking to us, seeing the God behind the Scriptures with poverty of spirit and contriteness and trembling, we’re not going to understand what the Bible is all about. So I say that seems like a good summary to this lesson of what the bible expects of us as we come to understand, as we come to the Bible itself. The word of God is to be feared.

So with that I will end. Any thoughts or questions about this lesson? Again, a lot of overlap between 3 and 4. But it’s important because in our day and age these Bibles that we have seem so ordinary. But they are the powerful word of God speaking to us, more precious than any other document that we can imagine. Any thoughts or questions?

Group Member: Doug, can you hear me?

Doug: Yes.

Member: First of all I’ll mention that with what you said last week and this week I’m very impressed. We’re really grateful for that.

I had a question. Not to take anything away from the importance of studying the Scriptures for ourselves, but I’ve heard you and Bruce make reference to some of the Puritans. Are there any particular Puritans that we should maybe look into or read about?

Doug: Oh, boy! Thomas Watson is one of my favorites, and perhaps maybe a bit easier to digest than some others. Some of the Puritans can write very dense, wordy sentences. But Watson is certainly one.

And then there’s another one with the wonderful name of Octavius Winslow that is a great English Puritan, one of my favorites. So those are two that immediately come to mind, Thomas Watson and Octavius Winslow.

Again, another book. I mentioned this book by J. I. Packer, *The Quest for Godliness*. Again, it’s a little heavier than some of Packer’s other works. But it’s a good introduction to the Puritans and why they’re worth thinking about, in terms of people who really took the time to understand God’s word and apply it in their lives in a way that may seem a little foreign to us today.

And he also makes the important point that the Puritans aren’t the stereotypes that we often hear about in 20th- or 21st-century America, or really in Europe for that matter, or the world. They were people with joy and love who understood that they had been redeemed. And they were very practical; it wasn’t just head knowledge. It was all about practical application of God’s word in your life so that your life would be changed and be

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glorifying to God and be a witness to others. So they’re not the stuffed shirts that we often think of them to be.

Member: Okay, thank you.

Doug: Sure.

Don Maurer: Doug?

Doug: Yes?

Don: What was the name of that preacher that you saw in Africa?

Doug: Well, the person I mentioned was Ben Kwashi.

Don: How is that last name spelled?

Doug: Kwashi.

Don: Okay. Thank you.

Doug: And Ben is one of the archbishops of Nigeria. He wasn’t the guy preaching in that service that I mentioned. That was a long time ago. But Ben is a dear friend and a faithful man of God, a great friend of a number of people here in Pittsburgh.

Don: Yes. I just asked it for the sake of the transcript.

Doug: Yes.

Don: Also in your opinion why is it—and in saying this about all of us maybe some of you are better at this; I say this about myself just as you said you did, Doug. But why is it that as a rule we don’t tremble at God’s word when we read it? Why is that not usually our experience?

Doug: I’ve thought about that a lot. I think there are two primary reasons. One is again that we have been very brainwashed into being a very, very, very over-confident people. We just think we know it all. We don’t have humility in this day and age.

Not that everybody in every age hasn’t struggled with a lack of humility. But there’s something unique about the post-Enlightenment 21st century. We have figured it all out. And even though we may not believe in all of what the Enlightenment brought forward, Enlightenment thinking has just crept into our psyche, into the warp and woof of our people and how we think about the world. So we tend to come at everything with a little bit of, “Oh, I know what’s going on.” So I think that’s one thing.

The other thing is that God’s word is so common, it is so very common. None of us would have any problem going to get a Bible, let alone having it on our phones, on our iPads, on our PCs. I’ve got all three of those devices in front of me. I’ve got an iPad here, I’ve got a PC here, and I’ve got a phone that’s sitting on the desk in front of me. All three of those have Bible apps on them. We see that they’re so easy to get to that we take it for granted. So I think that’s it’s just taking for granted who we are as a people. And that’s why we have to be very careful and very prayerful, to come before the Lord with great humility and pray for that poverty of spirit.

Now wouldn’t it be wonderful if one day we’re hearing God’s word preached and spoken, or in a bible study reading God’s word, and we started to notice that we were trembling! In our hearts we were trembling. I mean, what a blessing; what a blessing that would be!

Don: You know, in a kind of converse sort of way, I think that our persecutors have more of a fear of the word of God than we do.

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Doug: Sure.

Don: I mean, what are they so afraid of? If this book is nothing and it’s a bunch of nonsense, why do they want to stamp it out and kill those who believe it? There must be something to it.

Doug: Oh, absolutely. I mean, the Scripture itself says that the greatest persecutor of all is Satan and his demons. They tremble at the word of God.

Don: Mm-hmm.

Doug: Of course the demon minions who persecute the church are going to tremble. Yes, absolutely. Any last questions before I have to sign off and jump to my next meeting? Yes, Sig?

Sig Tragard: When you were telling us the story about the minister you met in Nigeria, the man of small stature, maybe five—

Doug: Yes.

Sig: And his courage to stand up to power, I was reminded of what we’re going through here in the United States when we see horrible things happening to innocent people, even though they might be of questionable character, or maybe even have a criminal background and some horrible things have happened to them. But what came to mind was the people in Charleston, South Carolina that invited this young man into their Bible study. And he sat with them for over an hour. And then he shot nine of them. I believe he took his own life.

Doug: Yes.

Sig: But the remarkable thing was that this same church invited the people of the Tree of Life synagogue here in Pittsburgh down to south Carolina, to Charleston, to help them heal, and to embrace their struggle. And to me that was so overpowering in the grace of God, to demonstrate humility, all the things you stated—poor in heart, poor in spirit, humility of heart, trembling at the word of God, and to have no fear in a way. I mean, fearing the word of God, yet embracing these people in great need, regardless of the pain and suffering they had been through in their own church.

Doug: Mm-hmm.

Sig: And I just wanted to bring it back home. I just thought that it was remarkable what you shared with us; I don’t want to diminish that at all. But I’m just saying that there are things going on here in our very city and in our very country that are terrible! And there are brave people, Christian men and women standing up to power and saying, “This has got to change.”

Doug: Exactly. Yes, that’s a great example.

Hey, one last thing before I jump. For those of you that are part of the men’s study, I’ll let you know that John Rodgers’ wife Blanche passed away last night around 10:00. She had been ill. She’d been in hospice for about the last ten days or so. But she did go home to be with the Lord last night. So I wanted to let you know that.

I’ve got to jump to another appointment. Thank you all for being here. Blessings.

Group: Thank you.