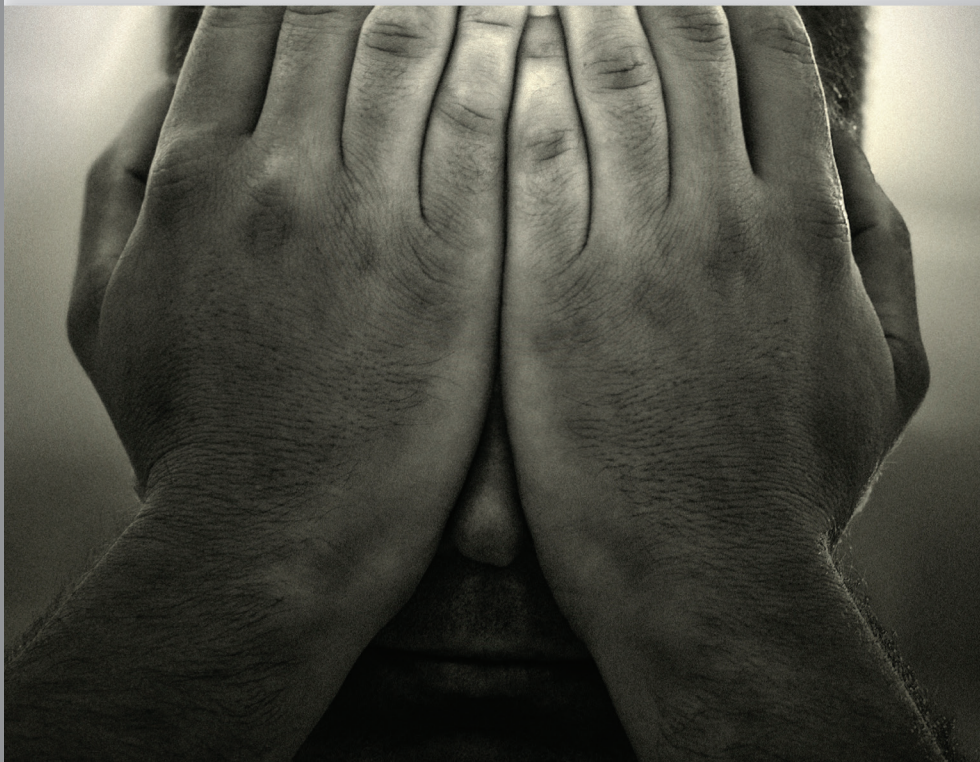


S T U D Y G U I D E



Fear and Trembling

by R.C. Sproul



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Fear & Trembling

The Trauma of God's Holiness

R.C. Sproul



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

Renew your Mind.

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Encountering God

INTRODUCTION

There are few people more zealous—and, often, more obnoxious—than a new convert. Whether it is someone who has kicked a bad habit, found a new computer program, or fallen for a new boyfriend or girlfriend, a convert seems to have a one-track mind. His or her new love is *the* topic of constant conversation. If we are patient, however, we usually can count on our zealous friend to come back down to earth, to temper that love with a dose of realism or perhaps even cynicism.

That change, however, can be a disappointment to the convert. He may find himself thinking back on those first heady days of that newfound love, longing for that sense of excitement and satisfaction. The joy of having kicked the habit is gone when the habit begins to kick back. That computer program becomes plodding and unreliable. That young man or woman begins to show some annoying tendencies. All of our earthly loves, no matter how strong they start, will fade as the thing loved likewise begins to fade. Emotions are spent over time. In short, all earthly treasures turn to rust.

There is one love, however, that should never grow cold, for the object of love never changes. That love, of course, is our love for God. When we embrace Jesus Christ and His work for us on the cross, we are changed more radically than we have ever been or ever will be changed. By His grace, we move from one whose greatest good is the self to one who is in the service of the only One who truly is good. And because we are now indwelt by His Holy Spirit, we should expect that our ardor will never wane, that our excitement will never diminish.

But it does. We lose sight of where we came from. We lose sight of where we are going. Worse still, we lose sight of Him. We remake our Maker in our own image. We begin to take grace for granted, and we begin to take for granted the One who has showed us His grace. Though He does not change, we see Him differently. We grow comfortable and at ease. But even though we have peace with Him through the merits of His Son, we should maintain a posture of fear and trembling before Him.

If indeed we have been redeemed by the one true God, we have been redeemed by a holy God. If the God we worship does not drive us to fear, we worship an idol of our own making.

Though the heavens declare the glory of God, we still forget it. We become distracted with the here and now. We listen to those ear-tickling prophets who tell us that there is “peace, peace,” when there is no peace. We grow at ease in Babylon, accustomed to this world, to His grace, and we avert our eyes from His judgment and dread.

It is not only the heavens that declare the glory of God. All of creation speaks of the same glory, down to the tiniest subatomic particle. His glory is too great to be contained in the most magnificent cathedral. It is too grand even to be contained in the most awe-inspiring galaxy. His glory fills the dance of the stars and the minuet of the minute. Such is true because there is no place where He is not. He is high and transcendent, but in that transcendence He stoops to this world. He is also immanent. While God has from time to time removed a part of the veil and revealed His holiness at holy times and in holy places, He is always holy and is always everywhere. Every time is a holy time and every place a holy place if we will but see it.

Wisdom, the Bible tells us, begins with the fear of God. If we will see the world as He has made it, if we will see ourselves for what we are, if we will see Him as He is, we will have both wisdom and fear. And having wisdom, we will seek fear. For the wise know that while it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God, there is no better place to be. Before His face is both stark terror and a joy that cannot be diminished. It's the only place worth being.

QUOTATIONS

God's holiness and His nature are not two things, they are but one. God's holiness is His nature, and God's nature is His holiness.

—Thomas Brooks

Power is God's hand or arm, omniscience His eye, mercy His bowels, eternity His duration, but holiness is His beauty.

—Stephen Charnock

LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. The Bible says that the heavens declare the glory of God.
 1. And yet it seems that we rarely experience that glory.
 2. People have all manner of conversion experiences, but the moment of conversion may be just one of those times when we see His glory.
 - a. But even then, we forget.
 - b. One year after his conversion, Dr. Sproul had another experience with the holiness of God.

- i. It was nearly midnight when he felt a need to get up from his bed and go out.
- ii. He entered the empty college chapel, where it was cold and so quiet he could hear the gears moving in the clock tower.
- iii. There, in the cold and quiet, Dr. Sproul felt the presence of God the Father.
- c. While we affirm that God is three persons in one being, we tend to focus our attention on Jesus.
 - i. He seems safe.
 - ii. But He came to reveal the Father, telling the disciples, “If you’ve seen me, you have seen the Father.”
- d. After his conversion, Dr. Sproul wasn’t interested in theology or philosophy.
 - i. He secretly read Billy Graham sermons in philosophy class.
 - ii. Then his professor began to speak about Augustine’s understanding of God’s power to create.
 - iii. Dr. Sproul wondered, “What kind of being brings things into existence merely by speaking?”
- e. Dr. Sproul read through the whole Bible in the first two weeks after His conversion.
 - i. He often found himself pacing the dorm hallways, especially as he read through the Old Testament.
 - ii. Though he had grown up in a church, he kept wondering why he had never heard of this God.
 - iii. We miss the judgment and the dread of God.

B. Holiness is the reason.

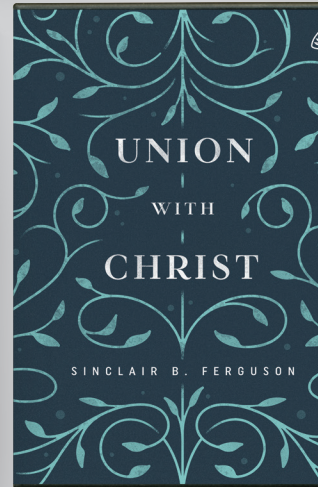
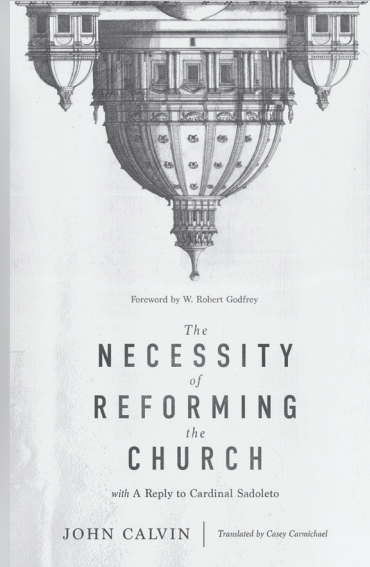
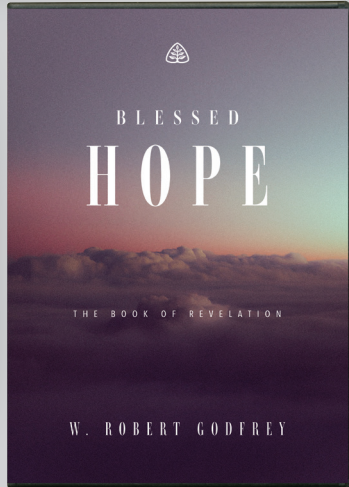
1. Holiness can be described as God’s transcendent majesty.
2. When Dr. Sproul was in college a professor asked him, “Young man, is God transcendent or immanent?”
3. Dr. Sproul said, “Both.”
4. The story of Jacob’s ladder illustrates that truth.
 - a. Jacob, sleeping alone in the desert, dreams of a ladder that joins heaven and earth.
 - b. God told Jacob, “Behold, I am with you always.”
 - i. He is always with us as well. But we don’t always feel it.
 - ii. But that we don’t feel Him with us doesn’t change the fact that He is.
 1. When Dr. Sproul preached in a time of hardship, he did not feel God was there. But the congregation felt His presence powerfully.
 2. How we feel does not determine whether God is present.
 3. He is with us even in the valley of the shadow of death.
 4. Remember Jacob’s conclusion—“Surely God is in this place, and I knew it not.”
 - iii. Have you ever felt that you have crossed that threshold and entered the presence of God?

1. If you have, you know that His presence provokes terror and dread.
2. In our age, we seem to have lost this fear.
3. But in the Bible, everyone who comes into God's presence trembles.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do the heavens really declare the glory of God? If they do, why do we so often miss it? And if we miss it, why did God make the world in such a way that His glory is declared? Who is the intended audience of the declaration?
2. Can a person really be saved if he or she never has had a conversion experience? Why are testimonies so different? What do they usually have in common?
3. Why do we miss the reality of God's presence? How can we combat this horrible tendency? Is there any difference between the sacred and the secular? If so, how can we tell the difference?
4. Should God's omnipresence be a comfort to us or a cause for fear? Or both? How might we be affected if we always remembered that we do all that we do before the face of God?
5. Why have we lost the capacity to experience the holy? Why do we find God to be more safe than frightening? Is it appropriate for even a Christian to have a dread of God?

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