

**G**od and fear are often deeply intertwined in our thinking. Fear is closely associated with our default understanding of God. For many people, fear is the instinctive emotional response to thoughts of God. Long-established expressions like “to put the fear of God into someone” illustrate just how intimately the emotion of fear is connected with the idea of God.

And, of course, those wishing to draw on the Bible to support the notion that fear is an appropriate response to God can do so with ease. “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,*” we are told in Proverbs 9:10. And there’s no shortage of accounts throughout the text of scripture where God or his angels appear to strike fear into people’s hearts.

So, fear is typically quite ingrained in our psyche as a response to God, and many assume that the Bible validates its appropriateness.

### **Fear or No Fear?**

And yet ...

The writer of the first epistle of John, shortly after telling us that God is love, has this to say:

*“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love”* (1 John 4:18).

And so we have a seeming paradox: on the one

hand, fear of God is something appropriate and even valuable and necessary; but on the other hand, God is love, and as such, there is no place or reason for fear in him.

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Now, those who hold to a flat reading of scripture in which all parts of the Bible carry equal weight can square this circle relatively easily. This apparent conflict between biblical exhortations to fear God and biblical assurances that God’s love does not include fear is often resolved by concluding that God is only fearful to those who don’t know him or who are in rebellion against him. Indeed, that’s how I myself would have dealt with this conundrum a few years ago. Now, however, it feels to me like a contrived approach and something of a cop-out.

### **Seeing the Father In and Through the Son**

In the magnificent prologue to the Fourth Gospel, the writer makes this astounding claim:

*“No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him*



BY ROB GRAYSON

**FEAR GOD ...**

**OR FEAR NOT?**

known” (John 1:18).

Jesus himself will go on to affirm the same thing a few chapters later:

“No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father” (John 6:46).

Here is a truth we really need to get into our heads and our hearts. What the Gospel writer is essentially saying is this: whatever you thought you knew about God up to this point was at best partial and at worst completely mistaken. Want to know what God is like? God is like Jesus. So forget all your old

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ideas—even the ones you got from scripture—and allow Jesus to redefine your understanding of God.

My point is that the revelation of God in Jesus should herald a dramatic evolution in our understanding of what God is like. If we simply bolt Jesus onto a pre-existing concept of God cobbled together from Old Testament understandings with a bit of Greek-influenced philosophy

thrown in for good measure, we’re missing the radical shift that Jesus and the New Testament writers are at pains to have us see.

Such a radical re-envisioning of our doctrine of God in the light of Jesus’ life and ministry should have major consequences for every aspect of our theology. And one of those consequences, I would suggest, is that we should eliminate any vestiges of fear from our intellectual or emotional response to God. That, I believe, is what the writer of 1 John is trying to tell us in the verse I quoted earlier.

Put simply, if thinking about God still triggers a response of fear, you haven’t yet allowed Jesus to fully correct and reshape your theology. Don’t take that as a criticism; just be patient and let Jesus continue to adjust your view. He’ll get you there if you’ll let him.

If there’s absolutely no reason for us to be afraid of God, why do we instinctively tend to think there is?

I have quite a simple theory about this. I think it comes down to the fact that our most fundamental conception of God is often that of an authority figure: someone who has the power to enforce his will upon us in ways that may hurt. If we understand authority in terms of power, which we usually do, then fear is a common and in many ways appropriate response. But if God is perfect love, and perfect love casts out fear, then we must conclude that whatever authority God has is of an entirely different nature from authority as we commonly understand it.

Perhaps it’s time to stop seeing God primarily as an authority figure, and to begin seeing him instead as a love so all-encompassing that he would rather submit to his own death at our hands than enforce his authority upon us. Perhaps, for some of us, setting aside an authority-based view of God is a vital step in allowing Jesus to reshape our theology. □

*Rob Grayson is a freelance translator from Coventry, England. He likes to write about the reconstruction of faith, theology and Christian culture. [www.faithmeetsworld.com](http://www.faithmeetsworld.com).*

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