

# *The Fear of God*

**J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)**

*And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him,  
which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28).*

THESE words were not spoken by Jonathan Edwards. They were not spoken by Cotton Mather. They were not spoken by Calvin, or Augustine, or by Paul. But these words were spoken by Jesus.

And when put together with the many other words like them in the Gospels, they demonstrate the utter falsity of the picture of Jesus which is being constructed in recent years. The other day, in one of the most popular religious books of the day, *The Reconstruction of Religion*, by Ellwood, I came upon the amazing assertion that Jesus concerned Himself but little with the thought of a life after death. In the presence of such assertions any student of history may well stand aghast. It maybe that we do not make much of the doctrine of a future life, but the question whether Jesus did so is not a matter of taste but an historical question which can be answered only on the basis of an examination of the sources of historical information, which we call the Gospels. And if you want to answer the question, I recommend that you do what I have done, and simply go through a Gospel harmony, noting the passages where Jesus speaks of blessedness and woe in the future life. You may be surprised at the result; certainly you will be surprised if you have been affected in the slightest degree by the misrepresentation of Jesus which suffuses the religious literature of our time. You will discover that the thought not only of heaven but also the thought of hell runs all through the teaching of Jesus. It appears in all four of the Gospels; it appears in the sources, supposed to underlie the Gospels, which have been reconstructed, rightly or wrongly, by modern criticism. It is not an element which can be removed by any critical process, but simply suffuses the whole of Jesus' teaching and Jesus' life.

It runs through the most characteristic parables of Jesus — the solemn parables of the rich man and Lazarus; the unrighteous steward; the pounds; the talents; the wheat and the tares; the evil servant; the marriage of the King's Son; the ten virgins. It is equally prominent in the rest of Jesus' teaching. The judgment scene of the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew is only the culmination of what is found everywhere in the Gospels. "These shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal." There is absolutely nothing peculiar about this passage amid the sayings of Jesus. If there ever was a religious teacher who could not be appealed to in support of a religion of this world, if there ever was a

teacher who viewed the world under the aspect of eternity, it is Jesus of Nazareth.

These passages and a great mass of other passages like them are embedded everywhere in the Gospel tradition. So far as I know, even the most radical criticism has not tried to remove this element in Jesus' teaching. But it is not merely the amount of Jesus' teaching about the future life which is impressive; what is even more impressive is the character of it. It does not appear as an excrescence in the Gospels, as something which might be removed and yet leave the rest of the teaching intact. If this element were removed, what would be left? Certainly not the gospel itself, certainly not the good news of Jesus' saving work; for that is concerned with these high issues of eternal life and death. But not even the ethical teaching of Jesus would be left. There can be no greater mistake than to suppose that Jesus ever separated theology from ethics, or that if you remove His theology — His beliefs about God and judgment, future woe for the wicked and future blessedness for the good — you can leave His ethical teaching intact. On the contrary, the stupendous earnestness of Jesus' ethics is rooted in the constant thought of the judgment seat of God. "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee; for it is profitable for thee to enter into life having one eye rather than having two eyes to be cast into the gehenna of fire." These words are characteristic of all Jesus' teaching; the stupendous earnestness of His commands is intimately connected with the alternative of eternal weal or woe.

That alternative is used by Jesus to rouse men to fear. "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him, which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Luke records a similar saying of Jesus: "But I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear. Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, fear him." There are those who tell us that fear ought to be banished from religion; we ought, it is said, no more to hold before men's eyes the fear of hell; fear, it is said, is an ignoble thing. Those who speak in this way certainly have no right to appeal to Jesus; for Jesus certainly did employ, and insistently, the motive of fear. If you eschew altogether that motive in religion, you are in striking contradiction to Jesus. Here, as at many other points, a choice must be made between the real Jesus and much that falsely bears His name today. But which is right? Is Jesus right, or are those right who put out of their minds the fear of hell? Is fear altogether an ignoble thing? Is a man necessarily degraded by being afraid?

I think, my friends, that it depends altogether upon that of which one is afraid. The words of our text, with the solemn inculcation of fear, are also a ringing denunciation of fear: the "Fear him" is balanced by "Fear not." The fear of God is here made a way of overcoming the fear of man. And the heroic centuries of Christian history have provided abundant testimony to its efficaciousness. With the fear of God before their eyes, the heroes of the faith have boldly stood before kings and governors and said, "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, God help me, Amen."

It is certainly an ignoble thing to be afraid of bonds and death at the hands of men; it is certainly an ignoble thing to fear those who use power to suppress the right. Even the fear of God might be degrading. It all depends upon what manner of Being you hold God to be. If you think that God is altogether such an one as yourself, your fear of Him will be a degrading thing. If you think of Him as a capricious tyrant, envious of the creatures He has made, you will never rise above the groveling fears of Caliban. But it is very different when you stand in the presence of the source of all the moral order of the universe; it is very different when God comes walking in the garden and you are without excuse; it is very different when you think of that dread day when puny deceptions will fall off and you stand defenceless before the righteous judgment throne. It is very different when not the sins of other people but your sins are being judged. Can we really, my friends, come before the judgment seat of God and stand fearlessly upon our rights? Can we really repeat, with Henley, the well-known words: "Out of the night that covers me, black as the pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever gods may be for my unconquerable soul," or this: "It matters not how strait the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul"?

Is this the way to overcome fear? Surely not. We can repeat such words only by the disguised cowardice of ignoring facts. As a matter of fact, our soul is not unconquerable; we are not masters of our fate or captains of our soul. Many a man has contemplated some foul deed at first with horror, and said, "Am I a dog that I should do this thing?" And then has come the easy descent into the pit, the gradual weakening of the moral fiber, so that what seemed horrible yesterday seems excusable today; until at last, at some sad hour, with the memory of one's horror of sin still in the mind, a man awakes to the realization that he is already wallowing in the mire. Such is the dreadful hardening that comes from sin. Even in this life we are not masters of our fate; we are of ourselves certainly not captains of our bodies, and we are of ourselves, I fear, not even captains of our souls.

It is pitiable cowardice to try to overcome fear by ignoring facts. We do not become masters of our fate by saying that we are. And such blatancy of pride, futile as it is, is not even noble in its futility. It would be noble to rebel against a capricious tyrant, but it is not noble to rebel against the moral law of God.

Are we then forever subject to fear? Is there nought, for us sinners, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation? Jesus came to tell us No! He came to deliver us from fear. He did not do so by concealing facts; He painted no false picture of a complacent God who should make a compact with sin; He encouraged no flattering illusions about the power of man. Jesus did not leave the realm of divine justice as it was, and establish in opposition to it a realm of love. But He introduced unity into the world by His redeeming work. He died not to abolish but to satisfy divine justice and reconcile us to God. In the days of His flesh He pointed forward to that act; He invited the confidence of man by the promise of what was to come. In our days we look

back to what has already been done; our joy is in salvation already attained; our boasting is in the Cross.

Even the Christian must fear God. But it is another kind of fear. It is a fear rather of what might have been than of what is; it is a fear of what would come were we not in Christ. Without such fear there can be no true love; for love of the Saviour is proportioned to one's horror of that from which man has been saved. And how strong are the lives that are suffused with such a love! They are lives brave, not because the realities of life have been ignored, but because they have first been faced — lives that are founded upon the solid foundation of God's grace. May such lives be ours!

Perfect love casteth out fear. But if it be our love which casteth out fear, our love is only a response to the loving act of God. "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." There is the culmination and the transformation of fear. "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men," says Jesus, "him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven."



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