

THE BOOK - HOW WE GOT IT AND HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF IT - Part twenty-one

Teaching #1983 - Sunday, July 16th, 2017 - 6 p.m.

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THE ONE WHO TREMBLES AT GOD'S WORD (continued)

Isaiah 66:1-4 - "Thus says the Lord: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?[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.[3] '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;[4] 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."

There's a sense in which **verse 3** gives meaning to the this whole text. We've been studying **verse 2** in detail, but that verse gets its meaning from **verse 3**. "**These have chosen their own ways...**" And it's because their ways were **their own** ways rather than **God's** that these ways are described as "**abominations**" (3). Their ways weren't abominations because they were always **violent** or **perverted**. They chose their own ways like **Eve and Adam chose to eat a piece of fruit**. What made the act an **abomination** was it was forbidden by God.

This is sin **defined**. And it explains why our whole culture can't **understand** either **sin** or **God**. Our world doesn't understand how we can **all** be sinners when many are relatively decent. They aren't violent and they aren't perverted. Our world doesn't understand why those who appear morally decent are still under the wrath of God. Acts - **all** acts - are defined as holy or sinful to the degree they line up with what God has revealed and to the degree they are done for His glory alone. Sin is **self-rule**, even if that self-rule doesn't manifest itself in moral baseness. Everything that expresses **independence** is under the **wrath of God**.

The verse we've been drilling down into is **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.**"

Last week we looked at five tell-tale signs of a heart that trembles at God's Word:

- a) **A heart that trembles at God's Word sees the authority of God behind everything God's Word says.** Perhaps this is best pictured in Moses' words to the people after receiving God's commandments: **Deuteronomy 32:46-47** - "...he [Moses] said to them, 'Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. [47] **For it is no empty word for you, but your very life**, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.'"
- b) **A heart that trembles at God's Word will never form a case against immediately performing God's Word.** Such a heart will suffer the loss of anything and everything else rather than treat God's Word lightly.

- c) ***A heart that trembles at God's Word takes seriously the judgment of God upon those who disregard His Word.*** The prophet Jeremiah was stunned that people who knew the awesome power of God would still dare to take a stand against Him:
Jeremiah 5:21-25 - "Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not, who have ears, but hear not. [22] **Do you not fear me? declares the Lord; Do you not tremble before me?** I placed the sand as the boundary for the sea, a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass; though the waves toss, they cannot prevail; though they roar, they cannot pass over it. [23] But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away. [24] **They do not say in their hearts, 'Let us fear the Lord our God, who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain, and keeps for us the weeks appointed for the harvest.'** [25] Your iniquities have turned these away, and **your sins have kept good from you.**"
- d) ***The heart that trembles at God's Word knows the depth to which He exposes the motives and schemes of the human heart.*** Such a disciple is kept in perpetual honesty and humility by this - **Hebrews 4:12** - "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."
- If other people could see every thought and motive and desire that has ever slipped through your unguarded moments, they'd never believe it was you. They'd never ask you to baby-sit their children.
- e) ***The heart that trembles at God's Word is constantly taught and drawn by God's unbelievable grace.*** Blind, phoney Christians merely **take** God's grace and run in their own direction. Genuine disciples are inwardly stunned and humbled that God should reach into their hearts with forgiving mercy and promise. Paul pounds this truth out in **Romans 2:4** - "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"

Those are five key signs of a living, trembling heart before God's Word. They put a specific **meaning** to the overused term **spiritual**. They reveal something that's **alive** and **beating** with genuine responsiveness to God. But we need to say a bit more. There are people who **don't** possess that kind of heart toward God, yet still aren't **bothered** by their dead condition. They don't even **perceive** themselves as spiritually dead, and would be insulted if you told them they were. Why is this? If they don't possess this kind of heart, why do they still claim imaginary spiritual life? That's what we're going to study today. We're going to look at things that are **similar** to heart spirituality, but not quite it.

In fact, there are three traits that are commonly taken for a trembling heart before God's Word, but aren't in themselves. A living trembling heart before God's Word isn't just an emotionally **moved heart**. And it isn't just an **agreeing heart**. And finally, it isn't just a **convicted heart**. And we're going to see this from a couple of passages:

- 1) **THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A HEART THAT TREMBLES AT GOD'S WORD AND A HEART THAT IS MERELY EMOTIONALLY MOVED BY WHAT IT HEARS**

Acts 24:22-25 - "But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, "When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case." [23] Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends

should be prevented from attending to his needs. [24] After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. [25] And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, 'Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you.'"

If we're going to sift all the truth out of these verses there are several important things to spot in Felix's heart. They're incredibly common in the church today, and frequently come to be identified with authentic spiritual life:

- a) ***Felix had an understanding of the truths about Jesus Christ and felt comfortable discussing them.*** This is made clear in **verse 22 & 24** - "But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, 'When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case'....24.... After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus."

Felix knew about "***the way***," which was the term quickly given to converts to Jesus Christ. They became known as people "***of the way***." Felix had an "***accurate***" knowledge of the way. His thinking was doctrinally correct. And he liked to discuss these things with those who might know even more than he. Our text says he actually "***sent***" for Paul (24) with a desire to hear Paul "***speak about faith in Jesus Christ***" (24b).

Felix knew Paul wasn't just some foggy minded dreamer or religious fanatic. He had respect for Paul and his beliefs. He had seen evidence of the working of God among the church. Probably he had either heard or perhaps even observed first hand the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit among these people of "***the way***." He liked what he saw.

- b) ***Also, Felix sensed that Paul was telling him the truth and sensed his own guilt - Acts 24:25 -*** "And as he [Paul] reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you."

In other words, Felix not only knew what Paul was talking about in the sense of getting the information. He recognized ***truth*** in Paul's words. At a certain level, his mind couldn't ***escape*** at least the initial edge of the Spirit's voice. The text actually says Felix couldn't help being ***alarmed*** by what he heard. That's the very word used in our text - ***alarmed***. Felix heard ***alarms*** go off while listening to Paul.

But for all of that, Felix ***pushes back against what he hears***. He sets up his own tug-of-war with the Holy Spirit. And that's the important point. Here is how hearts are measured. It's not by the initial positive interest or agreement. That proves nothing at all, except that you might have been physically awake. What counts is the ***level of commitment*** - the level of ***buy-in*** - to what you have heard.

In sending Paul away Felix shows there is something he's ***more*** afraid of than missing out on God's Word. Perhaps he's afraid of the political cost of hearing God. Perhaps he's afraid of what following Christ might ***cost*** him financially. But, at some level, he's afraid of ***buying into*** Biblical truth. There is something more important to him right at this moment. In other words,

ultimately, his heart *trembles more at something else*. He is willing to *procrastinate*. He does what we *all* do when God's Word cuts deep into our own agendas. He *pretends* he's going to hear more seriously later on. **"Come back later, Paul. We'll talk more."** Sure.

2) THE HEART THAT TREMBLES AT GOD'S WORD IS DIFFERENT FROM THE HEART THAT MERELY AGREES WITH DOCTRINAL CONTENT

If you, like I, am a second or third generation Christian, you must constantly probe your own heart. We have a terrible tendency to measure ourselves by counterfeit spiritual standards. We will tend to measure inward spiritual life by a checklist of correct beliefs. And there is nothing more deadening to a living, trembling heart before God than this.

James 2:19 - "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!"

Demons would qualify for membership in many evangelical churches. In fact, it makes an interesting study to look at the *faith of demons*:

- a) ***They believe in the one true God.*** It's worth noting that demons never worship false gods. Demons never bow before idols. They lead *people* to worship idols in order to gum up our lives with confusion and emptiness. But demons aren't that gullible. They know better. The only God they believe in is the ***one true God of the Bible, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.***
- b) ***They believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.*** You can see this over and over in the Scriptures. They have no doubt whatsoever about Jesus Christ. The Pharisees might have been willfully blind to Jesus' identity, but never the demonic world:

Matthew 8:28-30 - "And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. [29] And behold, they cried out, 'What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?' [30] Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them."

Demons know full well who Jesus is. They see His absolute power over all the forces of hell. They don't want *you* dwelling on that. But *they* know who Jesus is.

- c) ***They believe fully in the Biblical doctrine of the judgement.*** Again, this is clear from our text: **Matthew 8:29 - "'What do you want with us, Son of God?' they shouted. *Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?*"** They know all about that time. They know that a day of judgement is coming for themselves and all who forsake God.
- d) ***Demons believe all of these things so fully they are visibly moved and emotionally shaken by the force of these truths.*** **James 2:19 - "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder.**

In spite of all the apparent similarities between this reaction and the heart that Isaiah described as ***trembling at God's Word***, they're not the same at all. And that brings us to the heart of this teaching. The heart that trembles at God's Word is a heart that trembles out of *love* for God. It's a heart that

recognizes that our love for God - not His love for us - is a fragile thing. We fear **toying** with God. We fear **drifting** from His presence. Perhaps above all, we fear **grieving** Him more than we fear grieving anyone else.

A heart that trembles like this in the presence of God is really the essence of spiritual maturity. I can still remember the time when, after what must have been a particularly bad performance day from the Horban boys, my dad marched the four young brothers down into the basement of our parsonage in Prince George, British Columbia. There was my mother, doing - as she **always** seemed to be doing - the laundry.

She was crying, almost in disbelief at the wickedness of the sons she was trying to raise. My dad, optimistically, got the idea in his head that if we just caught a glimpse of mom's broken heart, that would instill more transformation in the demonic children than any beating he could muster.

Down the stairs we went into the damp darkness that was closer to a cellar than what we would now call a basement. There was mom. Silent and heart-broken. Dad marched all four of us up to her and made us apologize for our wayward behavior. We did. Then he told us he hoped that would stay in our minds and be punishment enough. I can remember, as clear as a bell, the four of us going outside into our back yard, picking up the football, and marvelling over the incredible good luck of not having been ushered into the presence of the Jesus at the hand of our father.

What dad was hoping for, and what we obviously weren't mature enough to possess, was a heart that would tremble at grieving the one we loved more than it feared physical punishment or pain. He recognized that ultimately that is the only thing that can permanently keep a life on track.

We argue our way out of **rules**. We can do things behind the back of any **supervisor**. But when our hearts tremble at grieving the one we love, we can at last **pursue** holiness because, rooted in love for God, we actually **prefer** pleasing Him to **not** pleasing Him. And you're less likely to cease **pursuing** holiness when you actually **prefer** holiness.

Here's the reason for so many surface changes and temporary conversions in the church today. The foundation never gets laid right at the beginning. People get temporarily and lightly moved before God for all sorts of reasons.

There can arise a temporary fear of the Lord because a loved one is sick and near death. And the fear of losing them drives us in desperation to making all sorts of promises to God. There can arise a temporary fear of the Lord because my teenager is going wild. Goodness knows I'd better get more serious about Jesus so my child will have a better example to follow. There can arise a fear of some major financial ruin or set back. Suddenly, I think I had better start tithing so God will prosper me when all the earthly financial systems run out of gas.

The list can go on and on, but what's missing in each example is a simple **fear of the Lord - a heart that trembles out of love for Him alone**. The pure fear of the Lord - the trembling heart - may have many desires. But the dominating desire is that God be glorified and pleased with everything I do - that nothing ever come between me and His smile of approval.

And now, as we introduced in our last teaching, we can finally understand why the Bible says the fear

of the Lord is the ***"beginning of wisdom."*** Wisdom is measured in God's eyes by what you ***fear losing most.*** If your heart fears losing God's favour more than it fears losing anything else it is impossible to make an eternally bad decision.

Psalm 111:10 - "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!"

Proverbs 1:7 - "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."

Proverbs 9:10 - " The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight."

Remember, define that religious sounding phrase - ***the fear of the Lord*** - in a way that reaches your life. The fear of the Lord is measured by ***what you fear losing most.*** If you don't obey God instantly because of what your friends will think then you don't fear the Lord. You fear losing popularity. If you don't make up with your spouse when God tells you that you should, then you don't fear the Lord. You fear losing your freedom or your pride. If you don't start tithing when you know God is telling you to, you don't fear the Lord. You fear losing your financial security or your pursuit of pleasure.

The fear of the Lord is revealed by what you fear losing ***most.*** When there's a price-tag attached to following God's Word - and there's ***always*** a price-tag - is there any price that's ***too high?*** That's the question that reveals whether or not you fear the Lord. And if you fear losing God's approval ***more*** than you fear anything else, then you truly have a heart that ***trembles at God's Word.*** And you can't make a bad decision there.