

THERE ARE SCARY THINGS ALL AROUND ME. WHAT SHOULD I DO?

We do often encounter dangerous or threatening circumstances. So did Timothy, an early missionary, when his friend Paul was imprisoned in Rome for his bold preaching. Timothy might well consider stopping his own testimony in fear of a similar fate. Paul writes to him to encourage him:

2 Timothy 1:7 For God hath not given us the Spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

The Spirit here is God's Holy Spirit, his Comforter given to all who receive the Lord Jesus as their Lord and Savior from sin. Paul says that fear of people or circumstances is never the work of the Holy Spirit. Instead, the Spirit give us *power* to face the threats that confront us, *love* even toward those who cough in our presence or vote what we think is the wrong way, and a *sound mind*, prudent self-control. A sound mind can indeed lead us to avoid unnecessary risks, as Solomon reminds us twice:

Proverbs 22:3 A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished. = 27:12

Timothy might prudently move to another town, if the people turn violent. But he will not bow to fear and stop preaching. Prudent believers will study the risks of a pandemic, monitor its progress, and take reasonable precautions. They will recognize the threats posed by certain political positions, study the issues, and vote responsibly. But they will not be afraid, and if they feel fear welling up within them, they will confess it to the Lord as sin, and cling to him more closely (Deuteronomy 10:20).

Even for believers, a healthy fear of God will enable us to pursue holiness more zealously (2 Corinthians 7:1). No one else, and nothing else, deserves our fear. We should grant it to God alone, and rely on our Lord to give us power, love, and prudence to face the evils of the world around us.

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THE SUBTLE IDOLATRY OF FEAR

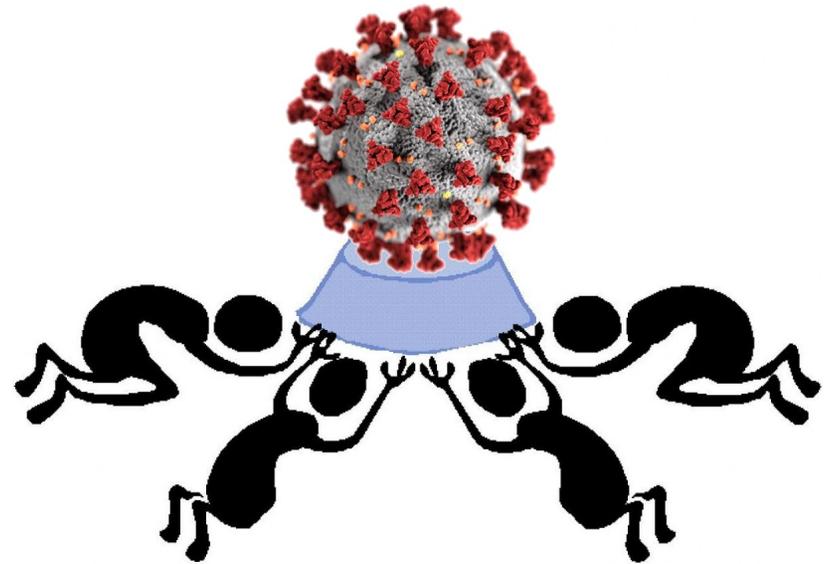


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Our generation is dominated by fear. Many people are obsessed with fear of contracting COVID-19. Each side in our fractured political system loudly announces what we have to fear if the other side is in power. Even prosperity brings fear, as we become addicted to newfound comforts, and fear that we might lose them.

Such fear is wrong. God's word teaches that whatever we fear, we worship. If we fear COVID-19, or the Republicans, or the Democrats, or an economic collapse, or anything other than the true God, we are idolaters. We must fear God, but if we fear anyone or anything else, we are worshipping a false God.

WHERE DOES THE BIBLE SAY THAT FEAR IS WORSHIP?

The Bible warns of this danger in 2 Kings 17. Israel (the northern kingdom) has fallen into gross idolatry, and the Lord allows Sargon II, the Assyrian emperor, to take the people into captivity. Sargon brings captives from other nations to live in the cities from which Israel was carried away. Those pagan nations learn some smattering of how to worship the God of Israel, alongside their pagan deities.

2 Kings 17:33 They **feared** the LORD, and served their own gods ... 41 So these nations **feared** the LORD, and served their graven images, both their children, and their children's children: as did their fathers, so do they unto this day.

But then the historian contrasts their fear of the Lord, as misguided as it is, with how the Israelites, even in captivity, are conducting themselves.

2 Kings 17:34 Unto this day they do after the former manners: they fear not the LORD, neither do they after their statutes, or after their ordinances, or after the law and commandment which the LORD commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel; 35 With whom the LORD had made a covenant, and charged them, saying, **Ye shall not fear other gods**, nor bow yourselves to them, nor serve them, or sacrifice to them: 36 But the LORD, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt with great power and a stretched out arm, **him shall ye fear**, and him shall ye worship, and to him shall ye do sacrifice. 37 And the statutes, and the ordinances, and the law, and the commandment, which he wrote for you, ye shall observe to do for evermore; and **ye shall not fear other gods**. 38 And the covenant that I have made with you, ye shall not forget; neither shall ye fear other gods. 39 But **the LORD your God ye shall fear**; and he shall deliver you out of the hand of all your enemies. 40 Howbeit they did not hearken, but they did after their former manner.

“The law and commandment which the LORD commanded the children of Jacob” (v. 34) is contained in the first five books of the Bible. These books repeatedly teach that the Lord is jealous

of our worship, and we must not worship and God other than him. 2 Kings 17:35-36 uses “fear” to describe the same kind of activity as “bow, worship, serve, sacrifice.” In other words, fear is a form of worship, a way that we show our devotion to a deity. The Lord deserves our fear, because he is worthy of our worship. But the prohibition against worshipping other gods means that we must not fear anyone or anything else. Conversely, when we fear something, we are worshipping it. If we fear COVID-19, or an aggressive foreign power, or one political party or another, we are turning that object of fear into a god. We are guilty of idolatry.

WHY SHOULD I FEAR GOD?

There are three reasons we should fear God.

First, we are all sinners, which means we have broken his law.

Romans 3:23 For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

Second, God is angry with those who break his law:

Psalm 7:11 God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day.

Third, he warns that those who sin against him will die.

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death.

Hebrews 10:31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The solution to this problem is not to pretend that God does not exist, and stifle our natural fear of him. Instead it is to accept the provision he has made, by sending his Son to die in our place and rise again:

Isaiah 53:5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.