

# What role does *fear* play in faith?

**DEAR FATHER KERPER,** When I was growing up, many people were strongly aware of God’s power to punish evil and reward good. I truly believe that this fear of God kept society in good order. Many people now don’t believe in God and those who do have little or no fear of God. I’m tired of hearing about mercy with no mention of God’s just punishments. Why doesn’t the Church speak more often about fear of God? When will the Church wake us up to evil? And let’s remember what the Bible says: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Is this no longer true?



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Thanks for your thoughts and questions, which I hear rather often. After all, when turbulence and immorality seem to overwhelm the world, people beg God to reveal his power in frightening ways, such as wars, plagues, visions, famines and societal decay. Though based on good intentions, this desire “to wake up” people through fear departs from our Christian understanding of who God is and how God acts. Indeed, fear-based strategies turn us

toward a false god known as the *deus ex machina* — “god from the machine.”

This Latin phrase, which goes back to the 5th century, refers to mechanical devices that dropped “gods” onto stages. Upon arrival, these “gods” turned the tide of battle, rescued the “good guys” and crushed their enemies.

When we invoke divine power to frighten people into repentance, we actually transform the true God of Jesus Christ into just another *deus ex machina*. In effect, we value these “gods” primarily as impersonal “powers” who stabilize decaying societies, protect specific nations and defend endangered ideologies. Even worse, we treat these “gods” like nuclear weapons held in reserve until everything else has failed.

Now let’s turn to *Proverbs 9:10*, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Doesn’t this simply express common sense? Our own childhood experience verifies that shaming and discipline by authoritative people actually work. Bad behavior stops. Children quickly settle down. And memories of early punishment congeal in their minds. Fear works. But does God operate primarily through fear? Everything here hangs on two words: fear and beginning.

The English word “fear” translates several Hebrew and Greek words that vary greatly in meaning. Most of us think of fear as our response to something or someone who wants to harm us. Beginning in childhood, we assemble a vast catalog of threats — local bullies, pit bulls, loaded guns, electrical wires, speeding cars,

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lightning and so on. When we see such things, we avoid or flee them. The heart of God, however, desires unity and reconciliation. We must therefore retrieve the primary meaning of the biblical words translated as “fear.” The closest English word here is “awe” — the intense fixation on the spectacular beauty of God.

Leon Kass, author of *The Beginning of Wisdom*, a commentary on Genesis, delicately balanced the intertwined words “awe” and “fear.” He wrote: “(Awe) holds one fast, attracted and transfixed before it: we flee from the simply frightening, we approach the beautiful or lovable.” In other words, the beauty of God eventually overcomes our fear, replacing it with love.

Kass’ point helps us to understand correctly the frightful events recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures — plagues, genocide, natural disasters and the great flood. These were all temporary afflictions, not the common experience of God’s chosen people. Moreover, we must recall that the terrifying “signs and wonders” of the Exodus era did not deter Israel from falling into the grave sin of idolatry.

Now let’s consider the second keyword of *Proverbs 9:10* — “beginning.” Here we focus on Israel, which has a unique historical and spiritual relationship with God. Israel acts as a “child” relative to God, its “father.” As a child grows into adulthood, so Israel does the same — understanding and appreciating his father more and more. In fact, the whole Old Testament can be read as a love story between father and child. At the outset, the human race, in the person of Adam, becomes terrified by God, but then gradually sheds the dry skin of fear.

While fear is indeed the beginning of wisdom, it is only the beginning, not the culmination of God’s plan for humanity. Instead, we find the endpoint succinctly described by both St. John the Evangelist and St. Paul.

St. John wrote, “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. We love because he has first loved us.” (*1 John 4:18-19*).

St. Paul wrote, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear.” (*Romans 8:14-15*).

Fear, whether within us or announced to others, always runs contrary to God’s word. As love increases, fear diminishes and vice versa. We have two “gods” to choose from: the *deus ex machina*, who promises order through fear; or the one true God, whose love within us casts out all fear. ■

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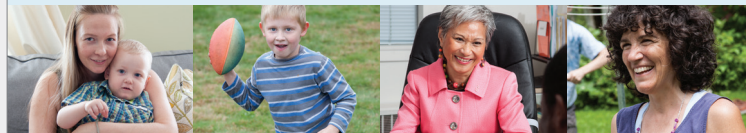
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