

God: Greatly to be Feared

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And the heavens shall praise thy wonders, O LORD: thy faithfulness also in the congregation of the saints. For who in the heaven can be compared unto the LORD? who among the sons of the mighty can be likened unto the LORD? God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him. O LORD God of hosts, who is a strong LORD like unto thee? or to thy faithfulness round about thee? Thou rulest the raging of the sea: when the waves thereof arise, thou stillest them. Thou hast broken Rahab in pieces, as one that is slain; thou hast scattered thine enemies with thy strong arm. The heavens are thine, the earth also is thine: as for the world and the fullness thereof, thou hast founded them. The north and the south thou hast created them: Tabor and Hermon shall rejoice in thy name. Thou hast a mighty arm: strong is thy hand, and high is thy right hand. Justice and judgment are the habitation of thy throne: mercy and truth shall go before thy face. (Ps 89:5-14)

Apparently Ethan, not David, wrote this psalm. What is the theme of the psalm? How does the psalm expect us to show God the fear that we owe to Him? Matthew Henry's commentary offers a notable focus of the whole psalm and its practical message for God's people in all times and circumstances.

"The psalmist has a very sad complaint to make of the deplorable condition of the family of David at this time, and yet he begins the psalm with songs of praise; for we must, in every thing, in every state, give thanks; thus we must glorify the Lord in the fire. We think, when we are in trouble, that we get ease by complaining; but we do more—we get joy, by praising. Let our complaints therefore be turned into thanksgivings; and in these verses we find that which will be matter of praise and thanksgiving for us in the worst of times, whether upon a personal or a public account...."27[1]

How pertinent to our complaining human nature! "We think when we are in trouble, that we get ease by complaining...." Few believers indeed ever mature to the point that they realize that the only predictable consequence of complaining is more problems and more problems that they believe justify their complaining. David reminds us that the "Happy people" are not the complainers, but those who live by the motto, "...that there be no complaining in our streets" (Ps 144:14). Sadly, many who claim faith in Christ live more by complaining, as if it were a divine commandment, than by a thankful heart. Despite the problems with the king's family and with the nation, Ethan focuses on God's goodness and sovereignty, concluding that He is to be feared, loved, and worshipped joyfully.

Often those who are young in the faith, or those who do not profess faith, but interact with believers, complain about the way life treats them or their loved ones; "It isn't fair." "*Why does God cause these things?*" My response is that God doesn't "cause" such things. Scripture consistently rejects the fatalistic idea that God causes everything that occurs. Typically, during seasons of distress and discouragement, people of faith resort to fatalism if they are inclined in that direction. For example, Jeremiah repeatedly rejects the idea that God caused Judah to commit Baal worship and burn their children in sacrifice to pagan gods so that He could punish them for seventy years in Babylon. If someone worshipped Baal or sacrificed their children, they could not blame God by saying, "We are delivered to do" these things (Jer 7:10). Many years ago a wise man observed that if a person suddenly starts blaming God in this fatalistic manner, he likely has just done something very sinful, or he is considering such an action. The world that we live in is not the world that God created. The unfairness that creeps into every life doesn't come from God, but from the fallenness of man, often the very person who complains the loudest. A dear family member and her husband smoked heavily from early adolescence till their early sixties. When they started suffering from severe heart disease, emphysema, and various other related illnesses, she complained that "It isn't fair." Perhaps it isn't fair, but she and her husband, not God, brought about these maladies by punishing their bodies with tobacco instead of

taking wise care of their bodies. Quite often we contribute to the very thing that we complain about as being unfair. We, not God, are responsible for much of the unfairness that we experience. At times other fallen people cause things that impose unfairness onto their fellowmen. They, not God, however, should bear the responsibility for their actions.

The Biblical attitude toward calamity is not to blame God for it and passively resign ourselves to it because He is behind it. Rather it is to understand that He stands above all such matters and provides us with the grace and goodness to survive and to overcome them. That is His role, not causing them and then diabolically taking credit for delivering us from the very evil that He supposedly caused.

Why is God to be feared greatly in the assembly of saints? Let's allow Ethan to give us some of the reasons.

As nature testifies to His wonders, the congregation of saints testifies to His faithfulness.

He is incomparable among humanity, or among any beings, real or imagined for that matter.

The enlightening parallelism of Hebrew poetry appears in Ps 89:7. Fear and reverence are set in parallel to each other. The Hebrew word translated "reverence" can mean anything from dread or fear to awe and astonishment. We have stereotyped the word fear to mean only something horrible and dreadful, but that is not the historical limitation of the word. We normally view "reverence" in a positive light and "fear" in a negative light. Ethan puts the two words in a parallel relationship. If you understand the significance of "reverence," you have the meaning of fear. Given God's majesty in nature and his faithfulness among the saints, He is incomparable, worthy to be held in exclusive reverence. At some point in time ministers of the gospel embraced the title "Reverend," but the Biblical basis of the word reserves it almost fully for God. At the moment I can only recall two passages where the word is used of anyone other than God. In Eph 5:33 Paul instructed wives to "reverence" their husbands. I doubt that worship is his intent here, but I suggest that this spirit in wives would transform many households and restore amazing order and grace to an otherwise toxic family dynamic. Then in Heb 12:9 the writer uses this word to draw a parallel between the attitude of young children to their chastening parents and our far wiser chastening God.

God's strength and faithfulness are again praised in Ps 89:9-13, including both His rule over nature and His wise and righteous governance over humanity.

Justice and judgment; mercy and truth characterize His providential governance over His people, Ps 89:14, hardly the view of the fatalist's diabolical god who creates sin, chaos, and pandemonium, and then with a pretense of goodness steps in to deliver people from the very chaos that he created in the first place.

Once again we realize from this passage that fearing God is a positive attitude of reverence and dignity, not a sinister dread of a tyrannical and unpredictable deity. The more predictable we realize that God is from Scripture the more we may safely trust and worship Him in Biblical "fear." The more we come to the realization of His consistently righteous, gracious, merciful, and powerful character the more we may come to terms that fearing Him relates to His goodness and majesty, not to a sinister or diabolical and unpredictable disposition. Thus fearing God is a privilege and a delight, thanks to His reliable and unchanging disposition. Matthew Henry had it right. We gain far more in praising and thanking God in the midst of our trials than we will ever gain by complaining and blaming, either God or others for our trials. "I want to praise Him more."