

# Perfect Love Casts Out Fear (1 John 4:17-21)

Expository Lessons from First Letter of John

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## I. Background and Review

- a. In the prior lessons in this series we looked at John's teaching on the importance of loving others.
- b. In the previous lesson we looked at the meaning of his description of God's character in the statement "God is love".

## II. From Prior Lesson - "No One Has Seen God"

- a. In the midst of the previous lesson on "God is love", I neglected to discuss an important point made in one line in the text. I would like to touch on that now, before we proceed further.
- b. "No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us." (1 John 4:12, NKJV)
- c. I would like to discuss the statement here, "No one has seen God at any time." It is a rather emphatic statement: it includes both *no one*, and *never*.
  - i. Let's stop and think about that statement. What about all those examples in the Old Testament where we have *people who saw God* and had direct personal interaction Him? For example:
    1. In **Genesis 3**, the Lord is walking in the Garden of Eden, and talking with Adam and Eve.
    2. In **Genesis 11** it says the Lord came down to see the Tower of Babel.
    3. In **Genesis 18**, the Lord, who Abraham refers to as Judge of all the earth (accompanied by two angels) has lunch with Abraham and Sarah, and speaks with them.
    4. In **Genesis 32**, Jacob wrestles with God all night long.
    5. In **Isaiah 6**, the prophet Isaiah says that he sees the Lord seated on a throne, surrounded by seraphim who cry out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory". Isaiah's reaction was "Woe is me... for I have seen the King, the Lord of hosts, with my own eyes."

- ii. **Question:** Is John mistaken here (in stating that no one has ever seen God), or are these Old Testament accounts wrong? Are there any other passages in the New Testament where it makes similar statements that *no one* has ever seen God?
1. Three other places in the New Testament where it says no one has seen God (referring to the Father):
    - a. “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” (**John 1:18**, NKJV)
      - i. ESV renders this: “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” (**John 1:18**, ESV)
    - b. Jesus said, “Not that anyone has seen the Father, except He who is from God; He has seen the Father.” (**John 6:46**, NKJV)
    - c. Paul (referring to *God the Father*) says, “...He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, *dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see*, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen.” (**1 Timothy 6:15–16**, NKJV)
  2. Several early Christian writers pointed out that since it is impossible for anyone to see God (referring to the Father, who dwells in unapproachable light), these passages in the Old Testament where someone “saw God” must refer to seeing the Son of God.
    - a. Recall that the Son of God (like the Father) also is fully divine. The Son is eternal and uncreated; yet can appear in a specific place and can take on bodily form.
    - b. From Irenaeus, bishop of the church in Lyon, in modern-day France, writing c. 180 AD:
      - i. “...the Son of God is implanted everywhere throughout the writings of Moses: at one time, indeed, speaking with Abraham, when about to eat with him; at another time with Noah, giving to him the dimensions [of the ark]; at another, inquiring after Adam; at another, bringing down judgment upon the Sodomites; and again, when He becomes visible, and directs Jacob on his journey, and speaks with Moses from the bush. And it would be endless to recount [the occasions] upon which the Son of God is shown forth by Moses.”

- ii. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 10; found in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 1, p. 473)
  - c. For more early Christian references to early appearances of the Son of God (prior to His incarnation in Jesus), see article on Theophany in *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. by David Bercot.
    - i. The word “theophany” refers to temporary appearances of God (corresponding to the Son of God).
- d. The point John is making here in **1 John** regarding “no one has ever seen God” is in connection with the importance of us loving one another, and “God is love”.
  - i. I believe the point John is trying to make in this passage is:
    1. God is love.
    2. No one has seen God.
    3. However, if we are of God, we will be loving others.
    4. In this way the love of God will be evident in the world, through us.
  - ii. Similarly, we also understand this principle in terms of “light”.
    1. God is light (**1 John 1:5**)
    2. Jesus is the light who came into a world filled with darkness (**John 1:1-9**).
      - a. “The people who walked in darkness Have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.” (**Isaiah 9:2**, NKJV; applied to Jesus in **Matthew 4:15-16**)
      - b. Jesus said, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” (**John 9:5**, NKJV)
      - c. The Nicene Creed refers to the Son of God as being “God from God, light from light, true God from true God...”.
    3. We must walk in the light (**1 John 1:7**) and be the light of the world (**Matthew 5:14**).
      - a. As Paul said, “Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, *children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,*” (**Philippians 2:14-15**, NKJV)

- e. The picture here is that we are that no one can see God; however, Jesus showed the love and light of God in the world while He was here, and *now we need to be that light and love of God that the world can see.*
  - i. We should not be discouraged to see a world around us engulfed in darkness. Our job here is to be the light while we are here.
  - ii. Being a Christian is much more than following a set of rules. It is reflecting the character of God (loving, merciful, holy, righteous) in a dark and hostile world. We are called to be God's ambassadors here (**2 Corinthians 5:20**), to point the way to God.

### III. Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

- a. Read **1 John 4:17-21**.
- b. **Question:** What is the meaning of the statement, "perfect love casts out fear"?
  - i. Several years ago, in a church I was attending I once heard the preacher read this passage and conclude, "I have some good news for you; we no longer need to fear God. Perfect love casts out fear, and now that we have been perfected in love, we no longer need to fear God as people did under the old covenant".
    - 1. The preacher then asserted that fear of God is an *inferior motivation*, which now has been replaced by the higher motivation: pure love of God.
  - ii. Some people consider love and fear to be practically opposites, and for that reason they conclude that both cannot effectively co-exist in a relationship. You can either have one or the other. They may point to contrasts such as:
    - 1. Love draws; fear repels.
    - 2. Love softens you; fear hardens you.
    - 3. Love produces security; fear leads to anxiety.
    - 4. Love heals; fear kills (literally, some people have died of heart attacks or strokes that came from the emotion of *fear*).
    - 5. Love is considered the most positive and enjoyable emotion, while fear is considered the most negative and destructive one.
  - iii. Many Christians who see fear as a negative emotion conclude that it is always a bad (or inferior) motivation for a Christian.

1. Popular “New Calvinist” preacher and author Tim Keller wrote: “Fear-based repentance makes us hate ourselves. Joy-based repentance makes us hate the sin.”
    - a. (Source: Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters*, p.172, Penguin)
  2. While the *fear of God* was taught regularly 50-100 years ago in most churches, this subject has become very unpopular today in the Christian world. Most churches in Boston want to focus on love (generally sentimentality, actually).
- iv. Regardless of what popular preachers are proclaiming today, Christians *clearly* are called to fear God. If we examine the New Testament, we will find that Jesus and the apostles spoke a great deal about the importance of fearing God.
1. Jesus used fear of God (and the fire of gehenna, hell) as a perfectly good motivation to keep us from sin.
    - a. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus addressed the sin of lust:
      - i. “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, *than for your whole body to be cast into hell*. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, *than for your whole body to be cast into hell*.” (**Matthew 5:29–30**, NKJV)
    - b. In **Mark 9**, Jesus provided a very sobering warning about the dangers of sin:
      - i. “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched—where ‘Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched—where ‘Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire—where ‘Their worm

does not die and the fire is not quenched.” (**Mark 9:42–48**, NKJV; where Jesus described the torments of hell by quoting from **Isaiah 66:24**)

- c. When Jesus sent out the apostles to preach, He told them:
  - i. “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather *fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*” (**Matthew 10:28**, NKJV)
  - ii. Here Jesus is telling the apostles that they need to fear God, not people.
- v. Some may object, “Yes, Jesus taught the fear of God, but in the gospels He was preaching under the old covenant. That was before the cross. Now that Jesus has been crucified and we are under the covenant of God’s grace and love, we don’t still need to fear God.” However...
  1. Let us not forget that one of the characteristics of the Holy Spirit that filled Jesus and fills all Christians is that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of *the fear God*.
    - a. Read **Isaiah 11:1-3**.
    - b. This is a foundational passage for understanding the attributes of the Holy Spirit (in the Septuagint, the text generally used when Jesus and the apostles quote from the Old Testament) note the seven-fold character of the Spirit.
    - c. If you don’t have the fear of God, how can you possibly have the Holy Spirit, since the Spirit is described as “the spirit of the fear of God”?
  2. Peter called Christians to fear the Lord.
    - a. “And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear;” (**1 Peter 1:17**, NKJV)
    - b. “Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. *Fear God*. Honor the king.” (**1 Peter 2:17**, NKJV)
      - i. In this statement, Peter summarizes the duties of Christians across all of our relationships. Note that he calls us to *fear God*.
  3. Paul used fear of God as a motivation for teaching Christians to submit to one another.

- a. Paul wrote, “submitting to one another in the fear of God.” (**Ephesians 5:21**, NKJV)
- c. Clearly, Christians are still called to fear God. When John says, “perfect love casts out fear”, he does *not* mean that Christians no longer need to fear God. So, what *DOES* John mean regarding “perfect love casting out fear”?
- i. One possibility is that John’s statement pertains to the Day of Judgment (when we, having been perfected, will not be afraid of what is to come).
    - 1. Note: Calvinists claim that if we believe in Jesus we are saved and *cannot ever* lose our salvation; therefore, they hold we have nothing to fear anymore once we become Christians.
      - a. However, that understanding would contradict what Peter, Paul and Jesus said regarding fear of God and the fact that we can lose our salvation if we do not remain “in the vine” (in Jesus, obeying His commands). (**John 15:1-6**)
    - 2. While we can lose our salvation if we abandon the faith and no longer walk in the light, perhaps this statement by John about “perfect love casting out fear” could refer to the confidence we can have on the Last Day.
  - ii. Another possibility is that the “fear” being cast out refers not to fear of God, but rather to *fear of men*. Therefore, if we have perfect love, we will *no longer fear men*. Tertullian (c. 160-230 AD), a Christian writer from Carthage, in North Africa alluded to this passage from **1 John**. Bear in mind that at the time Tertullian is writing, Christians in the West (in the Roman Empire) are still facing great persecution. In two early Christian works addressing persecution, Tertullian wrote:
    - 1. “John, in fact, exhorts us to lay down our lives even for our brethren, affirming that there is no fear in love: ‘For perfect love casts out fear, since fear has punishment; and he who fears is not perfect in love.’ What fear would it be better to understand (as here meant), than that which gives rise to denial? What love does he assert to be perfect, but that which puts fear to flight, and gives courage to confess? What penalty will he appoint as the punishment of fear, but that which he who denies is about to pay, who has to be slain, body and soul, in hell? And if he teaches that we must die for the brethren, how much more for the Lord, - he, being sufficiently prepared, by his own **Revelation** too, for giving such advice!”
      - a. (Source: Tertullian, *Scorpiace* [*Antidote for the Scorpion’s Sting*] chapter 12; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, pp. 645–646)

2. “Finally, mindful of his own **Revelation**, in which he [the apostle John] had heard the doom of the fearful, (and so) speaking from personal knowledge, he warns us that fear must be put away. ‘There is no fear,’ says he, ‘in love; but perfect love casts out fear; because fear has torment’—the fire of the lake, no doubt. ‘He that feared is not perfect in love’—to wit, the love of God. And yet who will flee from persecution, but he who fears? Who will fear, but he who has not loved? Yes; and if you ask counsel of the Spirit, what does He approve more than that utterance of the Spirit? For, indeed, it incites all almost to go and offer themselves in martyrdom, not to flee from it; so that we also make mention of it. If you are exposed to public infamy, says he, it is for your good; for he who is not exposed to dishonor among men is sure to be so before the Lord. Do not be ashamed; righteousness brings you forth into the public gaze. Why should you be ashamed of gaining glory? The opportunity is given you when you are before the eyes of men. So also elsewhere: seek not to die on bridal beds, nor in miscarriages, nor in soft fevers, but to die the martyr’s death, that He may be glorified who has suffered for you.
3. “...More glorious is the soldier pierced with a javelin in battle, than he who has a safe skin as a fugitive. Do you fear man, O Christian?—you who ought to be feared by the angels, since you are to judge angels; who ought to be feared by evil spirits, since you have received power also over evil spirits; who ought to be feared by the whole world, since by you, too, the world is judged. You are Christ-clothed, you who flee before the devil, since into Christ you have been baptized. Christ, who is in you, is treated as of small account when you give yourself back to the devil, by becoming a fugitive before him.”
  - a. (Source: Tertullian, *De Fuga in Persecutione* [*On Fleeing from Persecution*] chapters 9-10; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, pp. 121-122)
4. Points Tertullian is making in these passages:
  - a. The overall argument: while Jesus had encouraged those who are persecuted in one city to flee to another location (**Matthew 10:23**), Tertullian is making the point that Christians should not seek to avoid martyrdom.
  - b. Tertullian admonishes us, who will die of something anyway, not to die at ease (or for us, perhaps in a nursing home). It would be much better to die a purposeful death, for the One Who died for us!
    - i. It is more glorious for a soldier to die with honor on the battlefield, than to escape and save his skin.



- c. Tertullian calls us Christians to fear nothing, not even persecution and death. The world (and angels, evil spirits and Satan) are *the ones who need to be afraid of us!*
- d. In both of the passages quoted above, Tertullian alludes to his belief that the apostle John had expressed similar concerns in his book of **Revelation**.
  - i. I assume this refers to what it says regarding fear, in the address to the persecuted church in Smyrna, in Asia Minor (in modern day Turkey).
  - ii. “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. *Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer.* Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.’” (**Revelation 2:8–11**, NKJV)
    - 1. In this passage from **Revelation**, Jesus directly encourages the Christians in Smyrna to *not fear persecution*, the trials that they will face at the hands of men.
- d. If we do not love our brother, we do not love God.
  - i. Re-read **1 John 4:20-21**.
  - ii. If we claim to love God but don’t love our brother, we are lying (*we don’t really love God at all*).
    - 1. We can’t see God; we can only see our brothers.
    - 2. God has called us to love our brothers, with action (not just words).
  - iii. This is a challenge for Christians. We are fooling ourselves if we think we love God but don’t love our brothers and sisters.
    - 1. **Challenge:** Think of those brothers or sisters who are naturally harder for you to love. Maybe this includes people who have treated you badly in the past.
    - 2. The acid test: How do you love the ones who are hard to love?

3. Don't just be a religious person who, lacking love for their brothers and sisters, has no real love for God. Demonstrate your love for God by laying down your life for your brother and sister.