

A movie poster for 'The Two Fears'. The background is a large, dimly lit aquarium tank filled with various sharks and fish. In the bottom left corner, the silhouette of a woman with long dark hair is shown from behind, looking into the tank. A large black cross is superimposed over the center of the image. The text 'Cruciform Press' is written vertically on the top-left arm of the cross. The title 'THE TWO FEARS' is written in large, bold, white capital letters across the horizontal bar of the cross. Below the title, the subtitle 'TREMBLE BEFORE GOD ALONE' is written in smaller white capital letters. The author's name 'Chris Poblote' is written vertically on the bottom-right arm of the cross.

Cruciform Press

THE TWO FEARS

TREMBLE BEFORE GOD ALONE

Chris Poblote

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Tremble Before God Alone

Chris Poblete

Cruciform Press | Released April, 2012

To the beautiful Alyssa, a God-fearing woman
(a la Proverbs 31:30) who, next to Jesus,
is the clearest example of God's grace in my life.
May the Lord grant us many years of faithfulness
in marriage and ministry.

– Chris Poblete

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“I don’t know about you, but most of the things I grapple with in ministry, and in my own life, are summed up in two issues: We are too scared; and we aren’t scared enough. This book by Chris Poblete points the way to crucify our fear of man and to rightly order our fear of God. Reading this book will prompt you to seek in your own life the biblical tension between ‘fear not’ and ‘fear God.’”

Russell D. Moore, Dean, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Our lives can be guided by what we fear, and Chris Poblete wants us to fear the Lord! He unpacks for us, through the lens of God’s revealed character and the gospel, that fearing the Lord is not some cheap cliché, but a blood-bought gift for his people that leads to repentance, thankfulness, adoration and worship.”

Darren Carlson, President and Founder, Training Leaders International

“A.W. Pink lamented that ‘the God of the twentieth century ... commands the respect of no really thoughtful man ... The God of many a present-day pulpit is an object of pity rather than awe-inspiring fear.’ What Pink said of the 20th century rings true today when downsized deities and consumer-friendly “Christs” are a dime a dozen. Chris Poblete has written an importantly countercultural book, moving us beyond a homeboy God we could fist-bump to a holy God we can worship. *The Two Fears* helps us recover a biblical fear of God and all the awe, repentance, and freedom from self-centered fears that go with it. An awesome resource!”

Dr. Thaddeus Williams, Biola University; author, *Love, Freedom, and Evil: Does Authentic Love Require Free Will?*

“Chris Poblete is an artist and his book, *The Two Fears*, will take you on an engaging, picturesque journey through the orchard of fearing God. Along this path of wisdom, he will linger long enough for you to pluck its fruit and savor the richness of its gospel flavor, leading you to worship God as you forsake the lesser

enticements of this world. By God's grace, you will be freed from unholy fear and its fruits, and instead, enabled to embrace a lifestyle of faith and a habit of God-fearing worship: generosity instead of self-entitlement, humility instead of arrogance, reverence rather than indifference, dependence rather than doubt, obedience instead of revolt, and faith instead of faithlessness. The clarity and sobriety of *The Two Fears* will show you how to enjoy God as you magnify Christ and walk by the power of his Spirit. I commend this book to you: it will fuel your worship and empower your discipleship."

Gabe Tribbett, Director of Life Education and Leadership Development, Christ's Covenant Church, Winona Lake, IA

"Those who find themselves struggling relate to God and man in a way that is balanced and biblical will find an excellent guide in *The Two Fears* by Chris Poblete. This simple and direct book confronts and redirects our misplaced fear of man, reminding us of truths that instill a fear of God that is both biblical and life-affirming."

Richard H. Clark, co-founder, Editor-in-chief, *Christ and Pop Culture*

"Readers will be equally challenged and blessed as they read *The Two Fears* and heed Chris Poblete's call to embrace a holy fear of God—one that doesn't cause us to cower in terror, but empowers us to move forward in Christ's mission, entranced by the beauty and wonder of the cross of Christ."

Aaron Armstrong, author, *Awaiting a Savior* and *Contend*

"The writer of Hebrews teaches us that 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Hebrews 10:31). The writer of Proverbs states that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10). Poblete not only stirs us up to this truth, but teaches us what it means to fear God, that we stand in awe of God by hearing and heeding his Word in Scripture, and that the fear of the Lord will set us free. One who learns to fear the Lord need fear nothing else, for though God's wrath is fearful, his mercy

is awing as well. I hope you will hear Chris out, and that his book will teach us to both tremble and rejoice in the majesty of our God.”

Brad Williams, pastor, New Covenant Baptist Church, contributor, *Christ and Pop Culture*

“In this excellent and easy to read book, Chris Poblete tackles a topic that is often overlooked in contemporary Christian theology. As he examines an unhealthy fear of man and the fear of God, he leads his readers straight into the throne room of the One who is sovereign in and over all things—the One who is wisdom from God—the Lord Jesus Christ. Read this book, but beware—rather than you examining it, the Word of God will examine you and encourage you to consider that the God of the Bible is far more majestic and glorious than you ever dared to imagine.”

Dave Jenkins, Director, Servants of Grace Ministries

“This timely book enters into a church context where ‘God-fearing’ is out of vogue. Combining biblical passages, theological categories, pastoral wisdom, and his personal story, Poblete has given us a needed reminder of how important it is to be God-fearers if we seek to know God and live for him.”

Jared Oliphint Regional Coordinator, Westminster Theological Seminary; Contributor, Reformed Forum

“In this practical and very readable book, Chris Poblete describes a side of our culture—the absence of fear. ‘Where have the God-fearers gone?’ he asks. He shows how both the absence of true fear and the presence of ‘unholy [false] fear’ stem from an absence of a knowledge of the awesome God of the Bible, and that, in meeting him, we discover the real dimensions of creational existence and the wonderful benefits of living in fear and deep respect before him, freed from the ‘[false] fear of men.’”

Peter Jones, PhD, Executive Director, TruthXchange; Scholar-in-Residence and Adjunct Professor, Westminster Seminary in California

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INTRODUCTION

Most Christians will agree that we ought to love our God. But what about fearing God? The Bible says that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10), yet an honest assessment of modern evangelicalism would suggest that we do not today give the fear of God nearly that level of respect. Many Christians seem to assume that the gospel of grace trumps the fear of the Lord, and that wisdom now has some source other than godly fear. Yet only the God of the gospel is truly worthy of our reverential fear.

Encouraging a group of Christians, the apostle Peter wrote: “conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile” (1 Peter 1:17). Life is an “exile,” a short passing through on the way to our true home. And apparently we are to live this exile in godly fear. But what does that mean? And what does that *not* mean? What is good fear and what is bad fear? The Bible offers us a standard for the pursuit of answers, an explicitly active standard:

My son, if you *receive* my words
and *treasure up* my commandments with you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom

and *inclining* your heart to understanding;
yes, if you *call out* for insight
and *raise your voice* for understanding,
if you *seek it* like silver
and *search for it* as for hidden treasures,
then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.
For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and
understanding. (Proverbs 2:1-6)

My hope is that in the coming pages you will embrace every active verb in this passage from Proverbs—that you will receive, treasure, listen to, incline your heart, call out for insight, raise your voice, seek and search with all your might for holy reverence and the fear of the LORD.

As you do, the promise could not be more clear: then you will understand. Then you will fear. Then you will find.

One

THE NATURE OF FEAR

Along the Southern Californian coast is a short strip of sand called Aliso Creek Beach. Lined with picnic tables and fire pits, it's a popular place for afternoon picnics, family outings, and beach bonfires.

The college group I attended early in my Christian life frequented this spot every summer. I'll never forget one of these afternoon gatherings. A thick blanket of clouds hid the California sun, unusual for a summer in Orange County. The ocean breeze was especially chilly and the water was much too cold for good sense. Despite the conditions, my friend Chase and I decided to jump into the freezing ocean to see who could withstand it the longest. I cannot for the life of me remember what prompted such an idiotic dare, but it probably had something to do with the fact that sixty of our peers were shouting, "You guys are crazy!" I'm sure my 20-year-old self had something to prove that day, although I can't recall what.

The water was ice cold. The kind of cold that makes your diaphragm go rubbery once your chest hits the water

and you feel stupid because you suddenly forget how to breathe properly. In our contest of resolve, however, I had a secret. What Chase didn't know is that I used to play this game by myself when I was a small kid. I would jump into the family pool in the winter and, with chattering teeth and shaky breaths, I would grin and bear it until I could breathe normally again. In this water-treading face-off with Chase, I felt like a natural. After about a minute in the ocean, just as my lungs had reclaimed the ability to take full breaths, Chase began his shivering retreat to shore.

Instead of swimming in to claim my victory, I made a decision that would almost claim my life. A new believer at the time, I wanted all my new Christian friends to notice how crazy cool I was. As my pride swelled to biblical proportions, I swam out further from shore, just past the point where the waves break, and began floating on my back. I lay there in the frigid water — a demonstration of foolish arrogance if there ever was one — warmed by the thought that everyone onshore must be marveling at my stamina. When I switched back to treading water and my ears resurfaced, I immediately knew I had a bigger problem than just being cold. Instead of the noise of 60 college students on a beach all I could hear was waves. I scanned the shore for their bonfire and finally found it about 200 yards north. I had been drifting in a rip current.

The current was aggressively pulling me both further south and farther out from shore. I started swimming toward the beach, but every yard I went forward, I drifted at least another yard back. Soon I was almost half a mile south of the bonfire, and no closer to shore. Waves started

to break over my head and my muscles began to cramp. For the first time in my life, I feared the ocean. I suddenly realized that behind me lay an infinite amount of water, and below me in the depths lurked . . . I had no idea.

I gasped for air but swallowed seawater instead. Just as I began to admit to myself that I couldn't last much longer, a wave drove me under and tumbled my body like clothes in a washing machine. I tried to swim back up, but I had no idea which way up was. I almost stopped fighting, but instead for some reason I cried out silently to God for help. And at that very instant a wave pushed my head above water, I took a full breath of air, and my limp body rode the lip of that wave all the way to the beach like a dumb plank of wood that had learned how to surf.

Lying there in the sand gasping, all I could say was, "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus."

That afternoon, I discovered both humiliation and a fear of the ocean I had never known before. In God's good providence, this experience also gave me my definition of fear:

To fear something is to give credence to its power over you.

Credence is not a word we hear a lot. Let me explain.

When children are afraid of the dark, they give credence to the power that darkness has over them—fear of what could be lurking in the shadows. When one fears being alone, he gives credence to the power of loneliness over him—he accepts as true the possibility that he will never experience fulfilling companionship. Think of other things that people are commonly afraid of: drowning,

heights, spiders, snakes, clowns, conflict, public speaking, suffering . . . the list goes on. But God is rarely on that list. Why is that? How does God, the creator who transcends space and time, not make the cut? Should he?

Again, when we fear something, we give credence to its power over us. If you fear the ocean, your heart will pound when currents pull you away from land. If you fear heights, your knees will wobble when you approach the edge of a 12-story balcony.

And if you fear God, your heart will quake at the smallest glimpse of his majesty.

Consider the prophet Isaiah when he became undone before God enthroned: “Woe is me!,” he confessed, “For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (6:5). For Isaiah, to see God’s glory and majesty was to immediately acknowledge God’s power over him. The fragility of his own sinfulness came instantly clear as he stood before God’s holiness.

A Fear Forbidden, a Fear Commanded

Some say we don’t need to fear God anymore. They say this grand picture of God in Isaiah is the Old Testament God—or God of the Law—and that the New Testament God is best represented as Jesus, “Meek and Mild”—a Jesus that we shouldn’t fear, a God of grace. After all, they argue, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). Yet when the man who penned those words—John, the beloved disciple of Jesus—saw a vision

of the risen Christ at Patmos, he fell at his feet as though dead (Revelation 1:17).

The fear of the Lord is commended throughout Scripture. Let's look at just a few examples:

- God rewarded Abraham for his fear: “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Genesis 22:12).
- Fearing God is akin to loving your neighbor: “You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 25:17).
- Fear is a way to serve the Lord: “Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling” (Psalm 2:11).
- Fear is pure: “The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever” (Psalm 19:9, HCSB).
- Fear is a mark of faithfulness: “By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household” (Hebrews 11:7).
- Fear is something we will still know in heaven: “And from the throne came a voice, saying, ‘Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great!’” (Revelation 19:5).

At the same time, Scripture also warns against fear. When the Israelites gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, they saw thunder and flashes of lightning and heard trumpets blaring before a mountain billowing in smoke. As a result, they were utterly terrified. Moses then spoke

puzzling words to them: “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin” (Exodus 20:20). Here, Moses commands the nation of Israel both to fear God and not to fear God. So which is it? *To fear or not to fear?* How do we explain this seeming contradiction? John Bunyan clarifies, “that fear which already had taken possession of them, was not the fear of God, but a fear that was of Satan, of their own misjudging hearts, and so a fear that was ungodly.”¹

Bunyan goes on to say that there are two types of fear: “a fear forbidden, and a fear commended.”² Other fellow Puritans and Reformers have echoed these sentiments, careful to affirm a biblical distinction between the two fears:

- For Stephen Charnock, it was the difference between bondage fear and reverential fear.
- For George Swinnock, it was the difference between filial fear and servile fear.
- For John Gill, it was the difference between idolatrous fear and worshipful fear.
- For Charles Spurgeon, it was fear that draws men further from God versus fear that drives men toward God.

Today, however, many evangelical churches—especially those in the West—treat the fear of the Lord as a taboo subject. There is no distinction between good fear and bad fear. To us, all fear is bad fear. Fear is so un-Western, so unsophisticated, so unfashionable.

Talk about the fear of the Lord with Christians in

some rural areas of Rwanda and Uganda, however, as I have, and you will see how quick they are to get this notion of godly fear. They understand that God is mighty and they are not. They understand that they are dependent upon God to send rain so that they can grow food, and eat, and drink, and live.

When a Ugandan Muslim girl asked us what the religious landscape looked like in America, we included atheism in our response. Confused, she asked, “What is atheism?” When she learned that atheism is the belief that there is no God, she was floored: “Not believe in a god?!”

Even though this young woman did not believe in the God of the Bible, she knew enough about our fallen world from living in an impoverished Ugandan village that she could easily acknowledge that she was not entitled to anything. She knew to be thankful for simple things like food and shelter. She knew she answered to something, or Someone, bigger than herself for her very existence.

In contrast, Christians in the West—myself included—often feel entitled to what we have. From the roof overhead to the car in the garage to the technology in our pockets to the relative freedom and stability of our society—we feel we simply deserve it all.

This attitude creeps into the church, threatening our humility and, consequently, our worship. But a godly fear of the Lord requires that we give credence to the God who has power over us:

- the power to give and to take away
- the power to form us in a mother’s womb

- the power to know when we lie down and when we rise up
- the power to regenerate a heart of stone
- the power to number our days
- the power to enthrone rulers and make kingdoms fall
- the power to do whatever he pleases

Our God holds the power to save sinners, to reverse death, to destroy the bonds of Satan and sin. He is the mighty Savior and great Redeemer who can regenerate a heart, reform it from the inside out, and keep it for all eternity.

Do you know this God? Do you know the power he has over you? Do you acknowledge—give credence to—his power? His majesty? His splendor? His *being*?

This is godly fear. It is the fear of the Lord.

When we reject the notion that fear should characterize our approach to God, we rob ourselves of a worshipful delight that can only come through reverential fear. In his commentary on Psalm 22, John Calvin writes, “The fear which [David] recommends is not, however, such as would frighten the faithful from approaching God, but that which will bring them truly humbled into his sanctuary.”³

For the Christian, the fear of the Lord does not diminish the gospel of grace; it amplifies it. This reverential fear makes his grace more amazing, his mercy more grand, his justice more right, and his love more astounding.

The deeper our understanding of what it means to fear a holy God, the better able we will be to fear him as he ought to be feared, and the better able we will be to worship him as he ought to be worshiped.