

## Delighting in the Fear of the Lord

Deuteronomy 10:12-22

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APCE #3

12. So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. 14 Although heaven and the heaven or heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth will all that is in it, 14 yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. 16 Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. 17 For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, 18 who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. 19 You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. 20 You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. 21 He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. 22 Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

Moses stands up and says to all Israel, “What does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep God’s commandments. If you do this, it will be for your well-being.”

Love God? That sounds pleasant enough. Walk in God’s ways and keep the commands? We can do that. Serve the Lord with all our heart and soul? Oh, yes, we will do that, too. But fear God? Fear the Lord our God? Did anybody come to worship today out of fear?

The Bible talks this way. Some people dismiss this as Old Testament language, and therefore they think it doesn’t apply to us. But when God first appears in the New Testament, God sends an angel. And the first thing the angel always says is, “Fear not. Don’t be afraid.” The angel says it to Joseph, Mary, and Zechariah. Apparently there are good reasons to be afraid of an angel.

Then Jesus appears. He begins to teach and heal. After a long day of ministry, Jesus falls asleep in a boat. While he’s sleeping, the wind sweeps down off these 800 foot cliffs and swirls around the little Sea of Galilee. The waves are chopping, the sky is black, and the fishermen in the boat are frightened. They shove and say, “Don’t you care about this?”

And Jesus wakes up and says, “Shut up!” Suddenly the wind stops. The sea is still. And then they are really scared. “Who is this? And how do we get him out of our boat?”

Don’t forget that Jesus frightened some people. He cared for them, but when they see him up close, he frightened them. We heard the story from John 6. One day he fed thousands of people down by the water. Then he sent the boys back out in their boat, told the crowd to go

home, and went off to pray. In the middle of the night, Jesus looks out and sees the disciples haven't gotten very far. They are rowing against the wind. So he walks right out onto the sea. And it terrifies them. He comes and says the most fearful word in the world: "YAHWEH – I AM" – and then he says, "Stop being afraid."

Hold this picture of Jesus in view. Yes, the old hymn declares, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." And it's true: on behalf of God, Jesus befriends us. He does God's mission among us, around us, within us. But do not forget that a significant part of Jesus' ministry was scaring the hell out of people, because if you can scare hell out of them, heaven can enter in. And then, especially then, there is an appropriate fear.

Over and over again the Bible says, "Fear the Lord your God." Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, Moses says this is the heart of true faith. Open that Bible program in your computer, and hundreds of verses pop up. *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the fountain of life. Happy are those who fear the Lord.* Isaiah says of the Messiah, "*His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord*" (11:3). And there's one ancient text from Genesis where God is named "*The Fear*" (31:42).

You might want to use another word for that. Sometimes the word "fear" is translated "worship," as in *worship the Lord your God*. Sometimes the word is translated as "having a feeling of awe," nor amazement, or wonder. A true glimpse of God gives us a sense of God's size, power, and majesty.

But for a number of reasons, the best word for us may be "fear." *You shall fear the Lord your God*. And if you do this, Moses says life will go well for you. That is the claim of this text from Deuteronomy: *if you fear God, it will improve your well-being*.

That I did a quick check, however, and did not find this insight in any of the curricula that we teach. When searching for appropriate hymns for this text, all our hymnals came up short. There are many hymns that sing of God's love, God's mercy, God's presence, and God's protection, but there's precious little about holy fear.

But to speak of fear as a form of faith may sound like immaturity. Like those old Star Trek episodes. Remember the basic plot? Captain Kirk and the away team beam down to meet a tribe of simple people. They bow down before some Unseen Force, who shakes the soil with a loud voice. There is fire and smoke. If someone disobeys, they are disintegrated. The people are controlled by fright, and everybody stays orderly. Then some one from the Enterprise discovers the god really isn't a god. It's a machine or some other life force. Captain Kirk has a dilemma: should he break the Prime Directive and illumine these unenlightened people? Or should he leave them in blissful ignorance?

This was the question from the 1960's, when religious institutions were being questioned from within and without. Astronauts went up and people said, "Look for heaven, because it's up there." They came down and said, "If it's up there, it's not obvious," so some concluded heaven is an idea rather than a place. In our lifetime, scientists have discovered vaccinations and heart medicine and all kinds of other pharmaceutical goodies. We have a longer life through chemistry

and nobody wants that to change. But we haven't figured out how to get along with our neighbors or what to do with our time. Nor have we done much more than buy a little time. As a funeral director recently reminded me, the one perfect statistic is that nobody gets out of this life alive.

So what do we say? "The flower fades, the grass withers, but the word of the Lord lasts forever." If the world falls apart, God is still God. God is not diminished by human achievements. God is not compromised by our accumulated knowledge.

I think of the Preacher who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes. The older I get, the more sense he makes. Ecclesiastes is an observation about life. The writer watches how we spend our time, what we do, where we are ambitious. "It's all a mere wisp of smoke," he concludes. That's the root of his favorite word "vanity" - - a puff of smoke. It's a junk bond that evaporates because there is nothing behind it. You can spend your life chasing after power, affection, influence, prestige, sex, and money - and one day you discover it's all a puff of smoke.

"Fear God," say the Ecclesiastes Preacher, "for God will expose everything. Sooner or later, God will reveal every secret thing, whether good or evil." As I think about life and God's hidden hand, the truth has a way of coming out. It may take a while, but it always happens.

A few years ago, I was involved in some real estate dealings. As a pastor, I work with people who are pretty honest. But in the course of three weeks, I encountered people in my community who lied about toxic levels of radon, hid the truth about a property, and pushed their subordinates to get a larger share of money than the contract stated. One of the worst offenders had a big billboard declaring herself as a "power broker." *Don't these people fear God?*

I was grumbling about it and someone said, "Welcome to the real world." Oh really? That isn't the real world. That's the fake world. That's the illusionary world that resists honesty, justice, truth, and kindness. There is nothing real about it.

Let's go deeper and push it to the logical extremity. Suppose somebody makes a lot of money, builds a big house, pushes on up to the top of the hill? That's the new American dream, you know: to make enough money so you don't have to deal with any of your neighbors.

It's a tempting place, but we should not forget what Tony Campolo says: the day is coming when they put you in a wooden box, lower you into a hole, say a few words, and go back to the church basement and eat potato salad. That big house and the pile of money aren't going to do any good. All we might leave behind is a long line of people we've stomped on.

To fear God is to live within boundaries. It is to understand there are limits to what we can and cannot do. It is to remember there are limits to how we should and should not treat people, for even a quiet God will judge us. But the deepest truth is a proper fear of God puts a limit on our own importance. Even though God makes us with an infinite love, none of us has an infinite influence. If you find somebody who doubts this basic truth, ask them to check in with you in about a hundred years and see how things have turned out.

Think of some of the people we know. They do whatever they can to become influential. They have five or six Palm Pilots and spend hours synchronizing their appointments. “Can you have lunch next Tuesday?” “Let me check and make sure that nobody more important doesn’t want me.” So many people enjoy being so complicated.

“Dad, can you come to my ball game?” “Maybe, but I have to spend the next hour checking all my messages.”

“Grandma, can you read me a story?” “Wait a while, honey, I’ve have an exercise class, three e-mail accounts to check, two meetings at church, and then I might have a couple of minutes.” “But Grandma, that’s what you said last week.”

*How’s that going for you?* Did you ever notice? It’s so easy being important that we forget what actually is important.

Here is where Moses is so helpful: *Fear the Lord your God ... Love the Lord your God.* Fear and love. He puts these words side by side. They illumine one another. As Karl Barth says somewhere, “We must fear God above all things because we love God above all things.”<sup>1</sup> God is the only One who is worthy of our honor, our obedience, and our love. As Barth goes on to say, “When we love God above all things, we are never disappointed.” That’s his way of saying the best form of pastoral care is good theology.

Every day in our teaching ministry, we meet people who are afraid. They fear the loss of health, loved ones, money, jobs, potency, reputations, and dreams. We know how this feels, but we also know that our lives don’t belong to us as much as they belong to God. Everything we have is a gift. Everything we gain brings responsibility and moral limitations. We don’t have to worry about controlling anything, because we are not the ones who rule the universe. Last anybody checked, that job is already taken.

Somebody I know puts it this way:

The only way out of all this anxiety is to fear God. We don’t fear God because we worry he will hurt us, but because he loves us so incredibly much. Sacred love is uncontrollable. You can’t be certain how God will demonstrate his love, and that’s frightening. But if you don’t fear God you’ll fear everything else in life. If you do fear God you won’t fear anything else because nothing in the past, present, or future is beyond the power of God who loves you.<sup>2</sup>

Fear God. Love God. However we parse it, it all comes down to this: God is more important than we are. If we can find a way to teach these words, we can save and comfort a lot of lives.

But you already know this, because you are Christian Educators.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol 2: The Doctrine of God (Edinboro: T.& T., Clark, 1957) 33.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Barnes, National Presbyterian Church, unpublished meditation on Psalm 112.