

LESSONS FROM EXODUS
YAHWEH: THE GOD WHO IS TO BE FEARED
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One of my favorite cartoon characters is Ziggy. In one scene, he is on the couch in the psychiatrist's office. The doctor says to him, "Just because you are paranoid doesn't mean that they are *not* out to get you."

Fear. It may be that at this time in our country many of us are feeling more fear than we ever have in our lifetime. Yes, we may be paranoid. But we are also certain that "they" are out to get us.

Perhaps the famous words of Franklin Roosevelt (1882-1945), the 32nd President of the United States, come to our minds: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Memorable words, but not a novel thought. The English philosopher of science, Francis Bacon (1561-1626), put it this way: "Nothing is terrible except fear itself." Or, as the Duke of Wellington (1769-1852), the British general who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, once said, "The only thing I am afraid of is fear."

Well, while I am in the mood to share with you some famous quotes on the subject of fear, here are few more favorites of mine. Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682), English physician and author: "I fear God, yet I am not afraid of Him." John Witherspoon (1723-1794), Presbyterian minister and educator: "It is only the fear of God that can deliver us from the fear of man." And finally, from the wisest and wittiest word-crafter of all time, "Anonymous": "He who fears God need fear nothing else, and he who fears not God needs to fear everything else."

Let's talk about fearing God. This morning, as we continue our studies in the biblical Book of Exodus, we want to see what we can learn about *Yahweh as the God who is to be feared*. We will look at three aspects of fear: (1) fear as terror, (2) fear as an attribute of God, and (3) fear as worship.

First, there are times in the Book of Exodus in which the idea of fear is the rather normal sense of being anxious, or being afraid, or being terrified. In chapter 2, when Moses found out that his murder of an Egyptian was known—when Moses found out that he had been found out—he was frightened and he fled from Egypt (2:11-15). Then, when Moses was in the wilderness tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, God appeared to Moses in the burning bush. We read in chapter 3 and verse 6 that “Moses hid his face in his hands because he was afraid to look toward this God.” When the Israelites, on their way out of Egypt, saw that they were being pursued by Pharaoh and his army, “the people began to panic (they were scared witless), and they cried out to Yahweh for help”—chapter 14 and verse 10. And when Moses came down from the mountain carrying the stone tablets, his face glowed because “Moses had spoken to Yahweh face to face.” Verse 30 of chapter 34 informs us, “And when Aaron and the people of Israel saw the radiance of Moses’ face, they were afraid to come near him.” What I find especially enlightening and enthralling are those occasions when terror is evoked by the terribleness of Yahweh—when He is feared because He is fearsome. Perhaps a better way of phrasing this is to say there are times when people are afraid because the God of Israel is awesome. We have the expression that something is “awfully good.” Well . . . Yahweh is awfully awesome. Turn with me to chapter 15. Just a reminder, the translations that I will read in this lesson are my own. Ok, let’s begin with verse 11.

Who is like You, O Yahweh, among the gods?
Who is like You? You who are magnificent in holiness,
awesome in praiseworthy deeds, doing that which is extraordinary?

You thrust out Your right hand,
the earth swallowed them [the Egyptians].

With Your loyal-love, You have led the people You have redeemed.
By Your mighty power, You have guided them to the dwelling-place of
Your holiness.

The peoples have heard—they tremble.
Agony has gripped those who live in Philistia.

Now the chieftains of Edom are terrified;
the leaders of Moab, trembling has gripped them;
all who live in Canaan are aghast [lit.: have melted away].

Terror and dread have fallen over them;
by the greatness of Your arm, they are struck silent as stone (Exod 15:11-16a).

Yahweh is a God to be feared! If we do not fear Him, then we will be afraid of Him. The choice is crystal clear: live in trust or live in terror. Trust for Yahweh or terror of Yahweh. Which will it be? As my children would say, “That’s a no-brainer.” Well, it should be; but unfortunately, it is not.

Now, this being petrified with fear—or, this being scared stiff—because of the wondrous works of the LORD God, is closely connected with another aspect of fear in Exodus: fear as an attribute of God. Reread with me verse 11 of the Israelites’ victory song in chapter 15.

Who is like You, O Yahweh, among the gods?
Who is like You? You who are magnificent in holiness,
awesome in praiseworthy deeds, [OR, *terrible* in praiseworthy deeds]
doing that which is extraordinary? (Exod 15:11).

Look now to chapter 34 and verse 10.

And so [Yahweh] said [to Moses], “All right. I hereby make a covenant. In the sight of all your people I will do extraordinary deeds the likes of which have not even been imagined anywhere or by anybody. And all the people who are around you will see what I, Yahweh, am doing. For what I am doing with you is awesome” (Exod 34:10).

Literally, this last phrase reads: “For it is a *terrible* thing that I will do with you.” I realize that if I say Yahweh is a “terrible” God that, more than likely, you will understand me to be saying that God is bad. Nothing could be further from the truth. But if we think of the term “terrible” in the sense of something so overwhelmingly awesome that it causes us to be terror-stricken, then we are on the right track. Again, I remind you of our English manner of describing something that is wonderful as being “awfully good.” Now, is it awful or is it good? . . . Yes! . . . It is awfully good. In the same way, Yahweh is awfully awesome. In the words of one of our songs, “Our God is an awesome God; He reigns from heaven above with wisdom, power, and love. Our God is an awesome God!”

Ok, let’s shift gears. Let’s explore the concept of fear in terms of our moral responsibility. That is to say, in terms of worship and service. To do this, we will start at the beginning—Exodus chapter 1. Pharaoh’s attempt at curtailing the ever-increasing Hebrew population was to work the Hebrews to death. But, his slavish strategy has not

been successful. So, he turns to another plan for population control. We begin reading at verse 15.

Still not satisfied, the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah (“Fair One”),¹ and the second of whom was named Puah (“Fragrant One”),² “When you help the Hebrew women give birth, take care to determine the sex of the infant: if it is a son, kill him instantly; if however it is a daughter, she may live.”

But because the midwives feared God, they refused to obey the king’s command. Instead, they let the boys live. And so, the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “On what authority have you done such a thing, that you would allow the boys to live?” Thinking fast, the midwives answered, “We couldn’t help it, it’s not our fault. The Hebrew women are very strong. They have their babies so quickly that we cannot get there in time! They are not slow in giving birth like Egyptian women.”

So God favored the midwives. And the people of Israel continued to multiply, growing more and more powerful. Because the midwives feared God, He gave them families of their own.

Pharaoh’s next move was to command all of his people with this order: “Every son born to the Hebrews you must pitch into the river Nile; every daughter you may let live” (Exod 1:15-22).

Faced with a conflict between the demands of God and the decrees of Pharaoh, the midwives followed the dictates of conscience. Here we have history’s first recorded case of civil disobedience in defense of a moral cause. The motivation of these midwives in defying the king of Egypt is given as “fear of God.” The awareness and the acknowledgement of a Higher Power who makes moral demands on human beings is the ultimate restraint on evil and the supreme incentive for good. Let me put that point another way. *The fear of God that results in our recognition of His moral requirements for our lives is the ultimate restraint on evil and the supreme incentive for good.*

How many of you have seen the movie *The Ten Commandments*? What a masterpiece by Cecil B. DeMille! From the accounts I have read about the special effects, I think that DeMille had a much harder time parting the Red Sea than Yahweh did. For Yahweh, it was “a piece of cake.” For DeMille, it was—shall we say?—“a bowl of jello.” Anyway, as incredible as the spectacle was in the movie, it must have

¹שִׁפְרָה (*shifrah*).

²פּוּאָה (*pu’ah*).

been absolutely awesome in real life. This marvelous miracle is recorded in Exodus chapter 14. The last three verses of this chapter—verses 29, 30, and 31—read as follows:

The people of Israel had walked through the middle of the sea on dry land, as the water stood up like a wall on both sides. This was how Yahweh rescued Israel that day from the power and possession of the Egyptians. And the Israelites could see the bodies of the Egyptians washed up on the shore. When the people of Israel saw the mighty power that Yahweh had unleashed against the Egyptians, they feared Yahweh—they were in awe of Yahweh—and, as a result, they put their trust in Yahweh and in Moses, His servant (Exod 14:29-31).

When the people witness the wondrous work that God wrought, they respond in a number of ways: they fear Yahweh; they trust in Yahweh; they trust in Yahweh’s servant Moses; and they sing a song of praise to Yahweh for the life and blessing that had become theirs on this day. Because they fear the LORD, they put their faith in Him. Their awe of Yahweh causes them to trust in Him. A trust that expresses itself in obedience and commitment.

Now, let’s move quickly from the shores of the Red Sea to the foot of Mount Sinai. We come to verse 18 of chapter 20.

And all the people were experiencing the rumblings of thunder and the bolts of lightening and the sound of the ram’s horn and the mountain smoking: and as the people took it all in, they stood at a distance, trembling with fear. Then they said to Moses, “YOU—yes, YOU—tell us what God says, and we promise that we will listen. But don’t let God speak directly to us. Because if He does, we will die!” Moses reassured the people, saying, “Don’t be afraid. God has come in this way to show you His awesome power, so that your fear of Him might grip you and prevent you from sinning.” So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was (Exod 20:18-21).

What a sacred *and* scary scene! When Yahweh comes to Mount Sinai to enter into a covenant with the Israelites, they are scared to death by His awesome presence. Well, maybe they are not literally scared to death . . . but they are so scared that they fear dying. To see the sacred is scary. Notice Moses’ word-play with the term “fear.” He says, “Do not fear . . . that there may be fear of God.” I am reminded of the words, that I have already quoted, from Sir Thomas Browne: “I fear God, yet I am not afraid of Him.” And notice that this fear of God, the fear of worship, is a restraint on evil and an incentive for good. *The New Living Translation* renders the last part of verse 20: “From now on let your fear of Him [God] keep you from sinning.” Yahweh comes to Israel at Sinai to give

them so vivid and so unforgettable an experience of Himself, that they will not only *not* forget but they will follow His way as a first priority of life.

So, what can we conclude from our study this morning? I have two observations. *First, fear as terror is, for the most part, the polar opposite of fear as worship.* At Mount Sinai, the Israelites were deathly afraid of all that was happening. Yet, Moses assures them that they need not be afraid. The people are not to obey Yahweh because He stands before them as a threat. The proper response to what God has said and done is not terror but worship. The Hebrews were not to obey the law for the sake of the law. The law is *not* the focal point. *It is obedience to the One who gives the law.* It is to keep God Himself, and loyalty and allegiance to this God, as the focus of their attention in every dimension of their lives. Ultimately, it is not any system of law that serves as the greatest restraint against sin. No. It is respect and reverence for the LORD God that is the ultimate restraint on evil and the supreme incentive for good. The words of the Apostle John make this point better than I can.

God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face Him with confidence because we are like Christ here in this world.

Such love has no fear because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of judgment, and this shows that His love has not been perfected in us. We love each other as a result of His loving us first (1 John 4:16b-19, NLT).

My second observation is this: learning to fear the LORD has more to do with the obedience of worship than the adoration of worship—even though the two are closely connected. Worship is the expression of our total dependence on God. Obedience is the expression of such total dependence. In other words, we must worship Yahweh with not only our lips, but with our lives as well. Lois Cheney, in her book *God Is No Fool*, offers this meditation based upon Psalm 19:14.

“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.”

If it were just a matter of the mouth,
I wouldn't have so much trouble,
but it isn't,
and I do.³

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), the 17th-century French mathematician and scientist and Christian apologist, in his book *Pensées (Thoughts)*, penned this insightful thought about fearing God.

There is a virtuous fear which is the effect of faith, and a vicious fear which is the product of doubt and distrust.—The former leads to hope as relying on God, in whom we believe; the latter inclines to despair, as not relying upon God, in whom we do not believe. Persons of the one character fear to lose God; those of the other character fear to find Him.⁴

What about you? Do you fear losing God or do you fear finding God? Let me put the question to you this way: Who is more foolish, the child who is afraid of the dark or the adult who is afraid of the light? What are you afraid of?

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³Lois A. Cheney, *God Is No Fool* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 39.

⁴Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées* (trans. A. J. Krailsheimer; Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1966), 305.

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