

Hey Preacher! Sermon Series  
What Does It Mean to Fear God?  
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Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

What are you afraid of? You probably know if you have acrophobia, you have a fear of heights, and if you have agorophobia, you have a fear of crowds. But did you know that some people have coulrophobia, which means you're afraid of clowns? Other people suffer from ophalophobia, the fear of belly buttons. Are you scared of not having cell phone coverage? You have nobarphobia. People with anitadaephobia? They are constantly in fear of being watched by a duck. And there are even people who deal with hippopoto-monstro-sesqui-pedalia-phobia, which is the fear of long words.

What are you afraid of? We all have some kind of phobia, because we're all afraid of something. There's no such thing as being fearless. In the Bible, God gives a lot of different commands, but do you know the one God gives the most? It's not a command about how you treat someone else. It has nothing to do with what you eat or how you behave. No, the most common command in scripture is, "Do not be afraid." And yet, we are told over and over again that we are to fear God. So which is it?

We are continuing our sermon series today called "Hey Preacher!" in which we invited you to submit questions to us that you would like us to address in our sermons this summer. Today's question is a good one: What does it mean to fear God?

You may not be aware of how big an issue this is in scripture. The word "fear" is used over 300 times in reference to God, like the psalm I read, which says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Why do you think the writers of the Bible found it necessary to remind us over 300 times that we need to fear God? I think it's because it's so easy for us to forget to do that.

We need to start by talking about what we mean by fear in this context. As if often the case, we have one word for fear in English while the Greek language has several. One of the Greek words refer to a kind of cowardice, another to a fear of punishment, and another to a sense of awe or reverence. So we have to make sure when we talk about the fear of God we're talking about the right kind of fear, which in this case is the third kind I mentioned. To fear God means to hold God in awe or reverence.

I remember going to the state fair in Louisville as a kid. I would ride the rickety rides, play the rigged carnival games, and eat my weight in funnel cakes and elephant ears. One year, the famous Budweiser Clydesdales were at the fair. I had seen them on TV and wanted to get a close-up look at them, so we walked over to the area where they were being displayed. I had stood next to horses before, so I thought I knew what to expect. But have you ever stood next to a Clydesdale? It's terrifying. I imagined as a kid that one stomp of that horse's foot and I would be as flat as an elephant ear. The Clydesdale was so big, so majestic. That's the fear we're talking about here.

I remember the first time I visited Niagra Falls. Such an incredible sight! The sound of thousands of gallons of water rushing over the falls was mesmerizing. There was one viewing spot where you could get so close to the falls you could almost touch them. When I was that close, I could feel the full power of nature on display, and I realized I was two steps and a railing away from being swept away by this force. That's the fear we're talking about here.

So why do we have to be reminded over 300 times to fear the Lord this way? While we may feel it in relation to Clydesdales and water falls, I'd say we easily forget the importance of fearing God. I think back to Adam and Eve, who blatantly disobeyed God rather than honor God's request. Or Cain, who defied God when asked what happened to his brother Abel. Or the tower of Babel story, when the builders wanted to make a structure so tall that they would be equal to God. We humans have a nasty penchant for not fearing God.

Maybe this comes from familiarity. For many of us, at some point in our lives we were excited about our relationship with God, we couldn't get enough of Sunday School or youth group or Vacation Bible School. We prayed regularly and made sure we had something each Sunday for the offering. But then, as time passed, the relationship softened, the passion dulled, God was just...there. It's not that you kicked God to the curb, but God got pushed aside for bigger, better, shinier things, things that had more allure and promised more of a payout and were actually real. And God went from the pedestal to...who knows where. Of course, God is still there if we REALLY need God, but God is not our favorite thing anymore. We're no longer in awe. There's nothing to fear.

In hindsight, I think that's something like what happened to me before my sabbatical three years ago. It's not that I gave up on God or stopped believing; in fact, it's a bit of the opposite. God didn't grow distant from me; instead, God grew too familiar. God lost that other-worldly quality, that mystery and majesty that makes God...God. At some point, I stopped fearing God and started working with God. God got demoted from Creator to co-worker.

In Old Testament times, households would often have their own sets of gods, little carved images that would sit on a table as reminders of these little-G gods' presence. At some point, I became so familiar with God, the Big-G turned into a little-g. God became so familiar to me that I started taking God for granted. I domesticated God. My Lord's Prayer became, "My buddy, who's just hanging around, what's up?" There was no reverential fear there.

The one overarching thing I was reminded of while on sabbatical is just how much God is to be feared. God is so much bigger, so much grander, so much more majestic than I ever gave God credit for. During a string of blog posts I kept alternating between the phrases "awesome majesty" and "majestic awesomeness" because I ran out of adjectives to describe the God I was encountering.

I first experienced this when I stepped out of the airplane at the basecamp of Denali, the tallest mountain in North America. We were about 8500 feet up and surrounded by these 18,000 and 20,000-foot peaks that absolutely dwarfed us. And as I stepped onto the crunchy snow and looked up, it was like standing next to a Clydesdale on a whole new level. At that moment, I realized that I didn't understand God, would never understand God, and that I had seriously underestimated who God is. Our God is to be loved, for sure. But God is also to be feared.

One of the things this fear of God should produce in us is something we often actively rebel against: obedience. Proverbs 28 says, "Blessed is the one who fears the Lord always, but whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity." Here, fear of God is contrasted with a hardened heart, a heart not open to learning and growing and following God's lead. To fear God means seeking to obey God.

A parental analogy might be instructive here. Ideally, in a healthy parent-child relationship, a parent lays down rules of the child to follow, and the child then follows them, not out of fear of punishment (although that sometimes must happen), but out of fear of disappointing the parent. About the worst thing a parent can say to a child is, "I'm disappointed

in you.” So the child obeys out of respect. Now, if any of you can actually get that to work 100% of the time, I’ll bankroll your speaking tour and first four books.

That’s what the fear of God looks like. We don’t fear God out of cowardice or punishment, but because God is worthy of being fear, respected, obeyed. And when we harden our hearts to God’s leading, we become prideful, thinking we can put ourselves on the same level as God, that we aren’t accountable to God. Any parent out there heard the words, “You can’t tell me what to do!” Yeah, me too. We say that same thing to God all the time.

So fearing God carries with it a certain level of humility, and understanding that God is God and we are not. It means recognizing that our God is so big, so majestic, so much more than we can ever imagine. How big is your God? Does God still have the ability to take your breath away? Does God still command your attention, compel your response? Or is God just...there? Our little household god, sitting on the shelf, waiting for us to actually need God, to actually pay attention. I wonder if we don’t know how to fear God because our God is too small.

So I want challenge you to put yourself in places to recapture your understanding of God’s bigness. Read the psalms that talk about God’s creative power. Watch a nature documentary about the wonder of God’s creation. Marvel at the power of relationships, the miracle of the human body, the depth of God’s care for us. Yes, God is close to us, loves us, holds us. Don’t let God become too small and lose that sense of reverence. Because in times like these, we need God to be bigger than the challenges we face. That is where our hope comes from, that God is so much more than we could ever understand. God is so much bigger than we think. God deserves our reverence, our awe, even our fear. “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.” May we be made wise by acknowledging how much we don’t know. God is God, and we are not.