

## The Fear of Yahweh

VCS CHAPEL

10.23.15

This year's theme verse: Joshua 1:9, "... Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for Yahweh your God is *with you* wherever you go."

Like we've said, we have it even better than Joshua, because the ultimate Joshua came, died, rose, and gave us His Spirit. Immanuel, God *with us*, is now God *in us*.

Today's message is motivated by the conviction that we are always in danger of becoming too casual with God. We live in a Jesus-is-my-homeboy culture. Many pulpits and much of popular Christian culture are Biblically imbalanced. And one of the many results is that we don't think much of the presence of God. We aren't shaken to the core by the promise or the experience of the presence of God.

Let some words pop into your heads about the kind of attitude that we should have when God is "with us." We'll hone in on one of those Biblical words. But I want to lead this morning with the question: what was it like for people in the Bible when God was present?

Sometimes, in God's condensation, having veiled His glory (so that He didn't incinerate everyone), it was surprisingly normal for a person to be in the presence of God. But once they realized it, they trembled! I'm thinking of people like Hagar, Jacob, and Manoah, who freaked out after realizing they had been in the presence of God, because they knew they deserved to die, yet they somehow survived.

Isaiah 6 is vital for today's consideration. Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on His throne, and the hem of His robe filled the temple. This infinite, uncontainable God didn't fit in the heavenly temple! But the temple was filled with the edge of His glory, as it were. The seraphim flew around with six wings, crying, "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" But with two of their wings, they covered their faces. What an expression of reverence! These angels are sinless. They are called holy angels, but they are creatures, and they know their Creator is so otherly, so majestic, so glorious, that they don't dare stare at Him.

And when Isaiah see this, he doesn't think, "Oh, no big deal; the Lord has chilled with Abraham and the other patriarchs, so I'm cool." Not even close, because Isaiah knows that he is a sinner in the presence of the holy, holy, holy God. So he cries out, "Woe is me! I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips; because my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of hosts!" This is presented to us in God's Word as a healthy response to being in the presence of God. "Woe is me!"

And not just Isaiah. Simon Peter was in the boat with Jesus, who was teaching the crowds (Luke 5). Jesus tells Peter to go over there and cast the net into the deep. Peter is the professional, so he mouths off a little to Jesus about how he already knows that's not a worthy idea, but goes ahead with it, probably looking forward to telling Jesus, "I told you so." Then a miraculous number of fish swim into Peter's net. He's calling over James and John for help heaving it up. The nets are breaking, and the boats are sinking. And Peter realizes that Jesus

controls fish like Yahweh controls fish, and with fear and trembling, he falls at Jesus' knees and says, "Go away from me, because I am a sinful man, Lord." So similar to Isaiah's experience of the presence of the holy God – fearful because he knows he should be consumed by God's holiness.

Later the disciples were freaking out in the boat during that deadly storm. But check this out, after Jesus calmed the storm, Mk. 4:40-41, "He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" They realized Jesus controlled creation like Yahweh alone controls His creation. They had feared the waves, but then they were "filled with great fear" by the presence of God in Christ.

Daniel in Daniel 10 saw the pre-incarnate Son of God, and reported, literally, "my glory was changed to ruin" (10:8). He passed out, fell on his face unconscious! The apostle John on the island of Patmos, Rev. 1:17, saw the same divine being, the now-resurrected Son of God, and he had the same reaction. He "fell on his face like a dead man."

And these are the good guys! What about the sinning? Unbelieving Israel lost tens of thousands in outbreaks of God's wrath. Nadab & Abihu were flippant and presumptuous and offered unauthorized fire on the altar, and the fire consumed them (Lev. 10), because our God is a consuming fire. When the glory of Yahweh appeared before Korah and his rebels, the ground opened up and swallowed them. In Acts 5 Ananias & Sapphira (Acts 5) lied to God and dropped dead on the spot. In Acts 10 Herod received worship and was immediately struck down and eaten by worms. The Corinthians – pay close attention to this one – the *believers* in the *Christian church* in Corinth were eating the Lord's supper unworthily, disrespecting the Body and blood of Christ. In Paul's rebuke, 1 Cor. 11:30, he said "that is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died." God struck with sickness, *God even killed some people in the church* in Corinth because of their sin.

What about me? Do I think He could do that to me, if I rebelled against Him? What about you? Do you think God could do that to you? Have we tried to tame God? Have we misused the truths of His mercy to cancel out the truths of His holiness and majesty and jealousy and power and righteous judgment? Do we idolize a domesticated god? I submit to you, that if you do not carry around in your heart faith in those realities – the bad examples and the good ones – then you are not worshipping the one true God in spirit and in truth. You might not be believing in the God of the Bible. It is possible to fashion another god, a lesser god, that suits you better. We must let God be God. We must believe all of His words by which He revealed Himself.

Words like Heb. 10:30-31, "The Lord will judge *His people*. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." I expect you might resist applying that to yourselves, thinking there's no final judgment for those who have trusted in Christ, so I've cued up 2 Cor. 5:9-11 for you: "... we make it our aim to please Him. Because *we* must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others" (cf. Jude 1:23). Even believers will be judged for what we do. You will be judged for what you did or didn't do last night. Today. Tomorrow. "Therefore" – with the knowledge of Jesus' righteous judgment – we fear the Lord. And knowing the fear of the Lord, we evangelize.

This theme, the fear of God, is ridiculously pervasive in Scripture, and one of the biggest challenges for me is to pick a few of the hundreds of options for us to study. I want to spend the rest of our time here considering the fear of God as a primary attitude of the heart when God is “with you,” like our theme verse says.

Consider Ex. 20:18-20, the redeemed people of Israel at the foot of Mt. Sinai, in the presence of God, “Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”

The fear of God is supposed to keep us from sinning. So, the fact I’m not perfected yet, the fact that there are still times in my life when I sin, even times when I’m fully aware that the Spirit is checking me, commanding me in advance to take the righteous path, and I push past Him and intentionally transgress – those facts prove that I don’t properly fear the Lord. What about you? Prov. 8:13, “The fear of Yahweh is hatred of evil.” 16:6, “by the fear of Yahweh one turns away from evil.” So we need more of this fear of God.

But notice something. Moses told the people in Ex. 20:20, “Don’t be afraid.... The fear of God is to keep you from sinning.” With the same root word: don’t fear; fear. Obviously, there is a wrong way to fear and a right way to fear. It’s time to start working through some of that tension in your brains on this theme.

God tells people not to fear when He is being merciful, veiling His glory so that it doesn’t consume them. But that’s not permission for them to be irreverent. If we take God’s merciful offer of forgiveness and use it to become casual with God and flippant and irreverent, then we’re doing it wrong. Then we don’t understand God or forgiveness.

Ps. 130:3-4  
“If you, O Yahweh, should mark iniquities,  
O Lord, who could stand?  
But with You there is forgiveness,  
that You may be feared.”

Out of the one hundred verses I studied on this topic last summer, I think this one shocked me the most. *We* hear that God is forgiving, and we think we *don’t* have to fear Him. But God’s Word teaches that the very possibility of forgiveness *should cause* us to fear God!

How do we work this out? If God assures me of His mercy and forgiveness, which I can’t earn, it’s totally His free will, then I don’t have to be afraid of God in right relationship with Him. But I should be afraid of running away from God! There’s forgiveness no where else! There is no safety, no salvation apart from God. So my fear of God’s wrath causes me to seek refuge in God. Crazy, right? I seek refuge in God from God’s wrath.

God spoke this way to Isaiah in chapter 8: “Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. [Judah was fearing the alliance of Syria and Israel trying to destroy them.] But Yahweh of hosts, Him you shall honor as holy. Let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread.

And He will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.” This passage is quoted and applied to Christ in multiple places in the New Testament. I think God was telling Isaiah to realize that forsaking Yahweh would be so much worse than forsaking Syria. Let Yahweh be your fear and dread, and Yahweh will become a *sanctuary* for you. Take refuge from God’s wrath in God.

At this point, I want to ask, is “fear” the right word? I’m still wrestling with this English word. Today it seems to me that the primary and perhaps only connotation of the English word *fear* is *to be afraid*. And I’m not sure that the primary connotation of the Biblical witness with this word is that we should be afraid. I *do* think that is a part of it, but certainly not the only frame of mind portrayed it. Every good commentary I check uses the English word “reverence” to explain the fear of God. There are realities in Scripture that teach those who trust Christ should not be cowering in expectation of eternal condemnation, and yet they should revere God.

What is reverence? Maybe something like this: a serious, sober, awe-struck respect for the otherness, the holiness and majesty, the bigness and raw power of this righteous God, who is full of love and mercy and wrath and vengeance, knowing full well that He has the authority and would be right if He had already consumed me in my sin, and I don’t want to dare to rebel against Him, because the only safe and sane response to this God is to be ruined, undone, emptied of all pride and pretension and cast yourself upon Him and cry out for mercy and grace and to love and obey Him without reservation, with wholehearted devotion.

If that’s what we mean by “reverence,” then I like the word reverence. But if we pick it just to completely rid our doctrine and practice of any trace of fear, then I don’t like it. Because, Biblically, we should have a serious, sober, awe-struck respect for God, receiving His holy love and loving Him, adoring Him, delighting in Him, always utterly afraid of what we would deserve if we went back to belittling His glory and rejected Him and rebelled against Him. I wonder if you agree that we can’t jettison a healthy fear of rebelling against God.

Paul, in the middle of a warning *for Christians* in Rome, a warning that God will break off branches that do not persevere in faith, Paul said, “Behold then the kindness and the severity of God” (Rom. 11:22). Are you beholding and revering the God of kindness and severity?

Jesus in Luke 12:4-5, said, “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear Him who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him.”

It should be clear through all that came before that fearing God, revering God, is not just for Old Testament people, and it’s not just for unbelieving sinners. And this next passage makes crystal clear that fearing God is the right attitude for Christian believers. Heb. 12:28-29 concludes a section that celebrates our inclusion in the Assembly of God and also warns us against falling away. It says, “Therefore, let us be having gratefulness [for] receiving [an] unmovable Kingdom, through which let us be serving [in a manner] pleasing [to] God, with reverence and fear,<sup>29</sup> indeed because, ‘Our God [is a] consuming fire’” (Dt. 4:24).

The two Greek words here are different than the typical one and prove that an argument over using “fear” or “reverence” is probably a fool’s errand. We probably need lots of different English words that stress numerous nuances to this attitude before the holy, almighty God. Our holy God incinerates sinfulness, and those who are sealed for salvation will worship and serve Him with reverence and fear. That heart attitude *pleases* God: reverence and fear.

I’ve intentionally been throwing a lot of verses at you to justify this Biblical theme in a culture that rarely acknowledges it and often spurns it. And I could’ve used hundreds more. But I’d like to work toward a conclusion by stepping back to think of it from more of a big picture, systematic theology standpoint. And then end with what I think is a surprising twist.

God’s Word regularly calls the fear of Yahweh the beginning of wisdom. It’s where wisdom starts. It’s absolutely idiotic not to revere God.

The Scriptures regularly speak of reverence like it is the core of faith. Then Revelation 14 explains the result of believing what it calls the “eternal Gospel,” which is obedience to the Gospel’s demand: “Fear God and give Him glory” (14:6-7).

Reverence is at the core of faith, and irreverence is the core of sinful unbelief. By nature, none of us revere God as we ought, as He deserves, and we deserve to be punished for that. God spoke to Moses of our basic need in Dt. 5:29, “Who will give that their hearts might be like this, to fear Me and to keep all My commandments always?” In our depravity, we don’t and can’t fear God, so we need God to give us that ability.

And reverence for God is one of the chief gifts of the New Covenant. Jer. 32:40 promised, “I will put the fear of Me in their hearts, that they may not turn away from Me.” If you think sinners should fear, but believers shouldn’t, stop. The unregenerate should but can’t by their own fault, and believers should and can because the Spirit enables believers to properly fear God, to have a serious, sober, awe-struck respect for the holy, majestic, almighty God, who alone can forgive.

Acts 9:31 commends the New Testament church multiplying disciples who were “walking in the fear of the Lord.” Eph. 5:21 explains that being filled by the Spirit will result in relating to each other in the fear of Christ. Do you do that? Is the way you relate to parents, teachers, and peers conditioned by your reverence for Christ in you?

You know Phil. 2:12-13 is one of the biggest, paradigm-setting verses for me. I’ve quoted it so often, never properly emphasizing one clause, which I pray lands on you now: “Be working your salvation *with fear and trembling*, because God is the One working *in you* both to be willing and to be working for His good pleasure.” Paul loves the Philippians for their partnership in the Gospel. He calls them his joy and crown. He opened with his confidence that God, who began a good work in them, will carry it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (1:6). He foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and will infallibly glorify these Philippian believers because He is *in them*, working *in them* to effect their desiring and doing. And the fact that the holy, almighty God of the universe is in them should shake them to the core. So, still Paul says, “fear and trembling.” “Fear and trembling” is the natural response of a recognition that God is here.

And He is here. He is all around you. Where two are three are gathered in His Name, there is the special, manifest presence of God the Son. And, if you have believed into Christ with a repentant and submitted faith, then this God graciously dwells in you. Are you reverent? All day, every day?

Let's close with the surprising twist. Because you know I'm a Christian Hedonist. I believe you can't help pursuing pleasure because God wired you to pursue pleasure and find true satisfaction in Him, because when God is your greatest delight, He looks glorious. Your chief end is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever. So what is with all of this "fear" talk? Am I now telling you not to be happy? To be scared and sour? What may surprise you is that I am laboring for your joy when I'm telling you to fear God.

Ps. 112:1, "Happy is the man who fears Yahweh." Happy is the man who fears God! Only one Man has perfectly experienced that. Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah in Isa. 11:3, "His delight will be in the fear of Yahweh" (cf. Neh. 1:11). Jesus delighted to fear Yahweh, to be serious, sober, and awe-struck in reverence, not daring to displease His Father. And so with confidence in Christ's own reverent joy, I declare to you: the path to the greatest joy is to be in right relationship with God in His presence, and a major, indispensable element of rightly relating to God is reverence and fear.

You're not there yet. Neither am I. What do we do? At least these two things. Dt. 31:11-13 says we can "learn to revere Yahweh" by reading and hearing God's words. So, number one, keep studying God's words diligently. Do not pick and choose what suits you. Believe all of God's words, and let God be God.

Number two, repenting, confessing your sins, pray. Holy Father, put reverence for You in my heart like You promised in Jeremiah 32:40. Like Psalm 86:11, I pray, "unite my heart to fear Your Name." Give me an undivided heart that repents of spiritual flippancy, turns away from evil, stands in awe of you, and reveres you as You deserve.