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# Fear Not, Fear God

## A Sermon on *Fear* in the Story of Exodus

Tim Willis

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To fear or not to fear, that is the question. Biblical writers often speak of *fear* or *being afraid* (Hebrew *yare'*, Greek *phobeo*) as something negative and undesirable, a quality that believers need to overcome. For example, God tells Abram, “*Do not be afraid*, Abram, I am your shield” (Gen 15.1, italics added). The psalmist declares, “With the LORD on my side *I do not fear*. What can mortals do to me?” (Ps 118.6, italics added). Peter encourages Christians, “*Do not fear* what they fear, and do not be intimidated” (1 Pet 3.14, italics added); and John tells his readers, “There is *no fear* in love, for perfect love *casts out fear*” (1 John 4.18, italics added). But Biblical writers also speak of fear as something positive and one of the highest personal qualities to which believers can aspire. Several writers call on believers to fear God. “*Fear God* and keep his commandments, for that is the whole duty of everyone” (Eccl 12.13, italics added). “*The fear of the LORD* is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9.10, italics added). Peter tells Christians, “Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. *Fear God*. Honor the emperor” (1 Pet 2.17, italics added). Paul writes in a similar vein, “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect *in the fear of God*” (2 Cor 7.1, italics added).

The writers speak of fear in consideration of two competing assumptions. When they write of fear in a negative sense, they assume that someone is afraid of what someone else or something else can do *to* them. This negative type of fear actually has its effect whenever believers do not possess enough of the positive type of fear. When they fear God and recognize his authority and love, that fear of God assuages their fear of other things. Fear of God includes an acknowledgement of his omnipotence, and that reminds them of the limited power of the other things they might fear.

When biblical writers speak of fear in a positive sense, it is always in relation to fearing God. Fear of God certainly includes the fear of what God can do *to* individuals, but it also involves a fundamental notion of respect and reverence for God simply because of who he is and, consequently, what he has done and can do *for* them. Fear of God is fear that recognizes God as the Creator and Sustainer of all life. It is a natural and healthy reverence for God as a superior being—as the Supreme Being. It is a fear that emerges in response to the power of God demonstrated in his love. It is a fear that leads followers to submit to God’s will and commandments in order to participate in life to its fullest, knowing that God’s love wants what is good for them. This positive understanding of fear also recognizes God as Savior. He is the one who uses his power to free individuals from oppression and enslavement. A natural outgrowth of this type of fear is to emulate the one whom you fear; it is to “do unto others as he has done unto you,” in order to relieve them from oppression in imitation of how God has brought relief to you (e.g., Deut 24.17–22; 1 Cor 11.1).

### **Fear in the Exodus**

It can be difficult to understand the distinction between the two abstract types of fear, so we should look at concrete examples of both types as we find them in the Bible. One good source for some examples is

the story of the Exodus (Exod 1–14), as events involving four characters or groups of characters illustrate the dual nature of fear in the Bible. Viewed together, these characters reveal the challenge that we all confront as we strive to embrace the fear of God in order to overcome our fear of other forces in our lives.

The first kind of fear we encounter is perhaps the most admirable. It is the fear that we see in the Hebrew midwives (Exod 1.15–21). It is admirable because it flows naturally from within the women. They do not have to be convinced or persuaded to honor God, because they just know that he is with them and this is what he would want them to do (like Joseph, Gen 45.4–8; 50.19–21). The kind of fear the midwives exhibit entails high respect for God and his divine ways, and that respect translates into concrete action. The Pharaoh had ordered the midwives to kill Hebrew boys when they were born, but “the midwives *feared God*; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them” (Exod 1.17, 21, italics added). The midwives’ primary motivation is not fear of what God might do to them, but rather a sense of great respect for God as Creator of all life and the moral standards inherent in him (see similar sentiments expressed by Abraham in Gen 20.11). From a strictly legal perspective the women break the law and defy the king’s authority—they do not “fear Pharaoh and keep his commandments.” They disobey the royal command because they believe that God’s will transcends and, in this case, contravenes human law. Their respect for (fear of) God overrides their fear of the Egyptians and what the Egyptians might do to them. They submit to a higher authority.

There are two references to fears that Moses feels, and these two illustrate a basic progression of fear that is common in human experience. Moses first demonstrates the negative type of fear that grows primarily out of a natural concern for hurtful consequences, but then he develops a proper fear of God as a result of personal experience with God. In the first case, Moses killed an Egyptian who was beating another Hebrew man, and when someone subsequently mentioned the incident to him, “Moses *was afraid*, and thought, ‘Surely the thing is known.’” His fear prompted him to run away to Midian (Exod 2.11–15, italics added). Here Moses acts out of fear for what the Egyptians could do to him. In the next chapter and forty years later, Moses experiences fear of a different sort. When the Lord appeared to him in the burning bush on Mount Sinai, “Moses hid his face, for he *was afraid* to look at God” (Exod 3.6, italics added). Moses’s reaction probably reflects a mix of considerations, including fear of what God could do to him. But the primary component of the fear he feels in this episode is his great respect for God the Creator. He turns away because, as a mere mortal, he feels his unworthiness to look upon such an exalted and mighty God. We are left to wonder whether Moses would have responded differently in the first event (the flight to Midian) if he had already experienced the second event (the revelation of God in the burning bush).

The account of the seventh plague (hail, Exod 9.13–35) supplies a third example of fear, which will serve as an interesting contrast to the others. The characters experiencing fear at the time the hailstorm approaches are the servants of Pharaoh. Some of them “feared the word of the LORD” that Moses had announced and they took measures to protect their people and their livestock from the impending plague. But there are other servants that “did not regard [more literally, ‘did not put in their heart’] the word of the LORD,” and they left their workers and livestock out in the open (Exod 9.20–21). We might think that the servants who listen to Moses are to be praised for their fear, but as we read on we see that their fear is not mature. Their fear of the Lord is built almost entirely on concerns about what he might do to them. They regard the Lord from the standpoint of an enemy—an unfriendly force—so that there is an element of resentment or resistance to his authority. They do not fully submit to the Lord as Creator and Savior. They possess what we might call “foul-weather fear.” They listen to Moses and act because they have experienced the hurtful power of the Lord in the past, but once the painful conditions pass, they go back to life as usual. They begrudge the need to submit to his authority, rather than embracing it. Moses recognizes that this will be the case, and even before the plague is lifted, he declares, “As for you and your officials, I know that you *do not yet fear* the LORD God” (Exod 9.30, italics added).

This episode is quite enlightening, because it reveals how easy it can be for someone to move from fear of God to hardness of heart, from faith to rebellion. The type of fear exhibited by Pharaoh's servants is common. Their fear of God in this episode (v. 20) falls short of the mark because it is selfish. It is a fear that does not recognize or accept the mutually loving relationship the Lord wishes to enjoy with human beings. It is a self-protective kind of fear. It is the "we don't want to incur the wrath of God" type of fear. Such fear can be effective temporarily but, unless it matures and grows, it does not result in a deep and lasting change in one's heart, as these Egyptians demonstrate. The text identifies the deficiency in their fear specifically as a problem of the heart. The narrator attributes their loss of fear to the hardness of their hearts (Exod 9.34). Some did not heed Moses's warning, which means they did not take the word of the Lord to heart. But even those who showed some amount of fear of the Lord—in a positive sense—and took precautions out of respect for his power did not persist in this attitude once the immediate hardship had passed. The proper kind of fear requires a change of heart. It requires the kind of heart that we see in the Hebrew midwives, whose fear of God overshadowed any other fears they might have felt.

The final example of fear in the Exodus narrative illustrates a transition in the opposite direction. It comes during the climactic crossing of the Red Sea (Exod 14). Early in the scene the Israelites were "in great fear" as the Egyptian army approached them (Exod 14.10). The people uttered a strong complaint against Moses, accusing him of raising their hopes falsely and now exposing them to a fate worse than slavery. Moses exhorted them, "*Do not be afraid*, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish" (Exod 14.13, italics added). Their complaint grows out of their fear about what the Egyptians will do to them. He tries to assuage their fear with words, but words will not be sufficient. They will have to witness a display of power that exceeds the power of the Egyptians. Then follows the great parting of the waters, the crossing on dry land, and the drowning of the Egyptian troops. The Lord shows his "mighty hand and outstretched arm." So, the description of the event concludes with a statement of the effect that this mighty act has had on the people: "Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. *So the people feared the LORD* and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses" (Exod 14.31, italics added). Their fear of what the Egyptians could do to them has now been replaced by the fear of God, which recognizes the divine power and authority of the Lord. Their fear of God develops in direct contrast to the fear of God seen in the Egyptians because they wed fear of God to faith in God. The Israelites assume that the Lord exercises his power on their behalf and for their benefit. The Lord could certainly use his power against them, but their fear does not reflect a concern for that. The fear they possess respects the Lord as Creator, who causes and maintains life, and Savior, who brings relief from oppression and sin and death.

### **Fighting Fear with Fear**

One of the ironies of fear in the Bible is that it takes fear to overcome fear. Moses was afraid of the Egyptians and, to some extent, his own people. It took a personal encounter with God for Moses to acquire a healthy fear of God, and it was his fear of God that gave him the courage to face those whom he feared. The Israelites on the west side of the Red Sea were very afraid of the Egyptian army as it bore down on them, and it took an exhibition of the awesome power of God at the Red Sea for them to replace their fear of the Egyptians with a proper fear of God. Looking ahead, it would require several more acts of God's power to confirm and cultivate a mature and complete fear of God. The people not only survived in the wilderness but they grew spiritually and learned to face the fear of hunger and thirst, the fear of abandonment, and the fear of death, until they had learned what it truly means to say that "one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deut 8.3).

God's people will always wrestle to develop a healthy fear of God as they combat their fears of what other people and other things can do to them. That reality has not changed in the past 3000 years. A healthy fear of God is rarely inherited, perhaps never. It is something learned through challenges and heartache and the inevitable difficulties of life as mortal beings.

So what sorts of things do we fear? What are the typical challenges that require us to cultivate a deeper fear of God if we expect to conquer those fears? A detailed list could be almost endless, but let me suggest a few foundational ideas.

First, many of our fears arise when we view things from a purely physical perspective. The entire story of the Exodus is a story about gaining a new perspective. The Israelites viewed the Egyptians—and perhaps Egyptian gods—as the most powerful force in their lives. The Lord used the plagues to demonstrate his power over Egyptian powers. The people had to see the Lord humble the Egyptians and show his superior power to them in order to put the power structures in their lives into proper perspective. We struggle with fear in similar ways. We naturally fear other people and things that are more powerful than we are. But we need to remember that the God we worship is more powerful than they are, no matter who they are; and it is on the basis of that perspective that we face those things that we fear.

Second, many of our fears arise around things that we cannot control. These fears draw nourishment from a deep-seated desire within us to be in control. We desire to be self-sufficient. We desire to know what is going to happen and how we can most effectively deal with it. This is what Eve desired when she ate from the tree of knowledge, and it is a desire that all her children have inherited. We fear new diseases and natural disasters and accidents and unforeseen consequences because we cannot control them. We fear change. If we let those fears dominate our decisions, we eventually end up doing what is selfish and shortsighted and sinful. We need to hear for ourselves the exhortation that Moses gave to the Israelites beside the sea: “Do not be afraid, stand firm and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish” (Exod 14.13). We need to fear the Lord and live by his encouraging word: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps 46.10). We need to remember the words of the hymn inspired by this psalm, which says, “Be still, my soul; the waves and winds still know his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.”<sup>1</sup>

Third, many of our fears sprout from the root fear that we will be insignificant or irrelevant. We fear that we will not matter. Everyone wants to be valued, from birth to death. The cry of a newborn baby is a cry to be noticed; it is a cry of hope that others out there think this helpless baby’s discomfort is worth their attention. One of the deepest desires of someone who is facing death is that their impending absence from this life will matter to others around them. The concerns expressed in the Bible for orphans and widows arose from the experiences of those who were not valued as human beings. Ruth and Naomi praise Boaz because he values them. People who have little fear that they will have even less. People who have much fear that what they have will be ridiculed and discounted as insignificant by others, rather than admired. The prodigal son, like all who have sinned, fears to return home because he thinks that his father will not value him; and the older son in the same story says unkind things about his brother because he fears that he is insignificant to his father. The parable then serves as a strong reminder that the Father values all his children.

One of the amazing outcomes of proper fear of the Lord is the reaffirmation that you are valued by the Lord. When you fully breathe in the fear of the Lord, it is true that you are humbled and properly recognize your subservient status before the Lord. When you see the Lord in all his glory and power and majesty, you see that you—on your own—are ultimately meaningless and powerless and finite. But the amazing things is that you also see the Lord as Creator and Savior, who wishes to grant life and not withhold it. He made you in his image, imparting to you immeasurable worth and honor. He constantly provides for you, sustains you, and enables you to do all that you do. He has redeemed you from the sin that held you back, defeating the Pharaohs of your life that made you afraid, so that you could live fully with him for all eternity.

The story of the Exodus shows us that it is not easy to come to a proper fear of the Lord. It takes ten plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea before the Israelites learn to fear God, and the experiences of God that most of us have are not as dramatic as those events. Let us not be discouraged as we strive to attain that fear. Also, these stories remind us that it is easy to lose our grasp on the fear of the Lord. The Egyptian

1. “Be Still, My Soul.” First published with German lyrics by Katharina von Schlegel in 1752 and translated to English by Jane L. Borthwick in *Hymns from the Land of Luther*, 1855. Normally sung to the tune *Finlandia* by Jean Sibelius.

officials feared the Lord when they saw danger, but then they abandoned that fear when the danger was removed. Even the Israelites who witnessed the mighty acts of the Lord fall back into fear and start complaining as they travel through the wilderness toward the Promised Land. So we need to talk with each other about ways that we can encourage one another to fear the Lord. Let us share our fears with one another; let us be honest about things that make us afraid. But then let us move beyond those fears to examples where we have seen God prove himself to us. Let us acknowledge times when God has shown himself to us as Creator and Savior. When we face moments of fear and anxiety, let us say more than “it’ll work out.” Let us show clearly—in word and in action—that we fear the Lord, and so we believe that HE will work things out.

We will always struggle to keep things in our lives in perspective. There will always be things we cannot control. There will always be things that make us feel insignificant. There will always be reasons to fear. But fear not.

Fear God.

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