

PASTOR'S NOTES. Fear and an Angry God, Part 2

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die."

Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of Him upon you so that you do not sin." (Exodus 20:18-20, NRSV)

In the last article I started to try to answer the question of what it means to FEAR GOD. I thought I could give a simple, quick answer, but then I realized I had to address: 1- what fear is for us, 2- how we understand God, 3- what God's anger or wrath means. I was beginning to address the first, but I want to ask another question, what is AWE?

I suppose that many of you would think of *awe* as a sense of wonder, sometimes overwhelming, sometimes joyful to the point of ecstatic. But I think it would be accurate to say that there is (or should be) an element of fear in there. Especially if I am next to something huge, like a whale or dinosaur skeleton, or a skyscraper, I am aware that this is much bigger than me, and if it were to fall, I would get hurt. I would suspect that persons who work in zoos, especially with carnivorous animals, would probably say that they need to have a healthy mix of wonder and fear in order to keep from getting hurt.

As a husband and a parent, it occurred to me that my wife and my children at least at one point had some fear of me. My wife knew that I had the strength to hurt her, just by being careless, and likewise, with my children. It was likely much more for them because my relative size alone put them at risk; my touch, my voice, could hurt and even more so if they thought I was mad at them.

I wonder if our feat of God is something like that. After all, we know that God is so much bigger (however we understand that) and more powerful than us, that in theory He could hurt us without trying.

Moses said, "Show me Your glory, I pray." And He said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," He said, "you cannot see My face; for no one shall see Me and live." And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by Me where you shall stand on the rock; and while My glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with My hand until I have passed by; then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen." (Exodus 33:18-23, NRSV)

This sounds to me like a God who wants to grant Moses' request; there doesn't seem to be any anger here. But God also warns Moses that just because of his overwhelming power, Moses's life could be in danger. It's kind of like if I pick up a tiny animal in my hands – I could carelessly crush it and cause permanent damage or death. A similar thing seems to be happening in Genesis 32:25 where Jacob is wrestling with a "man" who puts his hip out of joint (perhaps permanently, we don't know), and then Jacob goes on to say "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." (Genesis 32:30)

I don't think I'm making this up about *awe*. I looked at a bunch of old hymns, and when they talked about "that awful day" or "that awful darkness" I think they mean awful about the same way that we do today. But Charles Wesley writes in 1755, "God of awful majesty, Thy glorious name we praise." Isaac

Watts writes in 1707, “How sweet and awful is the place with Christ within the doors.” Awful there seems to mean something a little different. Today singers usually say “awesome” instead, but I’m not sure that word quite captures the intended sense.

Isaac Watts writes in 1719: “Before Jehovah's awful throne, ye nations, bow with sacred joy; know that the Lord is God alone: He can create, and He destroy.”

Charles Wesley writes in the 1750s: “Lord, if Thou hast bestowed on me this gracious fear, this horror of offending God – O keep it always here.”

Kyle Matthews and Tony Wood write in 2001: “God forbid that I find You so familiar that I think of You as less than Who You are; God forbid, that I should speak of You at all, without a humble reverence in my heart.”

I think that these and more are trying to impress of us that we need to fear God, but not because God is angry. We fear God because He is so much greater than us, and *if* He were to desire our destruction, we would have no way to stop Him. I believe it is unfortunate that many of my colleagues teach that God needs to be feared because of His anger and because we deserve punishment – but I’m getting a little ahead of myself. Just realizing God’s greatness should be enough to inspire wonder and awe (which is a kind of fear).

On the other hand, if we are assured that our God is not angry at us, we can recognize our fear and trust in Him.

Some years ago, Jean found out that she had cancer. She talked about it openly in her church, she took her grandson with her when she bought the wigs she would soon be wearing. A diagnosis of six months turned into three years, and then she got weaker until she could barely get out of bed. When I saw her one day, she said “I’m embarrassed. I’ve told people for years about how I’m not afraid of death and going on to live with the Lord, but now that it is coming, I am afraid.” I don’t know if I gave the best response, but I said, “Do you think that when a skier goes down a steep hill or a firefighter runs into a burning building that they have no fear? Or do you think they recognize the fear but decide to go on in spite of it? You should be afraid – you are facing something humanly unknowable, and forces that are far stronger than any of us. But that fear by itself should tell you that you’re not in charge here, and the only reason to linger in that fear is if you insist that your only hope is in you. I suspect you are exactly where God wants you to be if you are willing to admit your fear and put your trust in Him.”

I could probably end my response to the question of the Fear of God here; but I want to say more about this angry God we have been taught to fear. That will take another article. In the meantime, remember that our God is an awful – or I mean, awesome – God, and either way still doesn’t say enough about His greatness.

Yours in Christ,

