

Faith: Fearing God above All

Hebrews 11:23-29

Today I want us to think about the relationship between faith and the fear of the Lord. Basically those who “fear the Lord” have faith - they trust God - because the alternative is too dangerous. In *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard gives this insight on the fear of the Lord:

Fear is the anticipation of harm. The intelligent person recognizes that his or her well-being lies in being in harmony with God and what God is doing in the “kingdom.” God is not mean, but he is dangerous. It is the same with other great forces he has placed in reality. Electricity and nuclear power, for example, are not mean, but they are dangerous. One who does not, in a certain sense, “worry” about God simply isn’t smart. (Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, p. 51)

If you have the fear of the Lord, you have concluded that it’s foolish to ignore God or dismiss God. You therefore pay very careful attention to what God has revealed about Himself: that God is great and that God is good. And you pay very careful attention to what He wants of you: you pursue a life of obedience and holiness (instead of dismissing God’s Word). Because you fear God you align your life with Him and His Word - even when it’s difficult and even when the alternative would be a lot easier. In other words, people who fear God live by faith.

Today’s passage is Hebrews 11:23-29. These verses describe a cluster of events related to Moses in which people feared God above all else and therefore lived by faith. This passage doesn’t explicitly mention that they feared God, but their fear of the Lord is implicit by the fact that they “did **not** fear the king” whose will was contrary to God’s. One of the things we’ll point out is that it took them some time to get to the place where they feared God instead of fearing others.

The past couple of weeks I’ve encouraged you to identify an area of your life in which you need to exercise faith: an area of obedience, a relationship, a decision, a circumstance. This morning I’ll encourage you to explore how the fear of the Lord informs what faith looks like in this area of your life. If you fear God above all else, what are the implications for the decisions you make, for your approach to obedience, for the way you conduct yourself in relationships? Keep this area of your life in mind as we work our way through this passage.

The Faith of Moses’ Parents (Hebrews 11:23)

Verse 23 speaks of the faith of Moses’ parents. Even though the children of Israel were in slavery in Egypt, they “were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them” (Exodus 1:7). They became so numerous that Pharaoh became concerned that the Jews would join their enemies if there were a war. So he first afflicted them with increasingly difficult labor; but God kept multiplying them.

Second, in a rather desperate and cowardly move, the pharaoh issued an edict which required the Hebrew midwives to kill the Jewish boys as they were being born. The plan completely backfired because the Hebrew midwives “feared God” and let the sons of Israel live (1:17, 21). Pharaoh then commanded “all his people” to carry out this edict by “casting into the Nile [River]” every son born to the Jews. In this context Hebrews 11:23 speaks of the faith of Moses’ parents.

23 By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king’s edict.

Exodus 2:2 tells us that when Moses’ mother “saw that he was beautiful, she hid him for three months.” The word translated beautiful is the term commonly translated “good” (*tov*). This statement that Moses’ mother “saw that he was good” echoes of the refrain found in Genesis 1 where God created and then “saw that it was good.” I think that the verbal connection suggests that she saw in her child a creation of God - perhaps one who would play a strategic role in His purposes on earth. And so she hid him for three months. When she couldn’t hide him any longer Moses’ mother had placed him in a water-tight basket on the banks of the Nile at a time when Pharaoh’s daughter would find him. In the sovereignty of God, Pharaoh’s daughter had pity on him and arranged for Moses to be raised by his own mother until he could become part of Pharaoh’s household (probably at age 2 or 3).

In an ironic, wonderful turn of events, a descendant of Abraham was now living in the household of the Pharaoh of Egypt. God had once again thwarted a plot to wipe out His chosen people. The author of Hebrews comments that his parents’ actions were an expression of faith. Specifically he mentions that “they were not afraid of the king’s edict.” Like the Hebrew midwives, Moses’ parents feared God more than the king. Of course it is normal for parents to love and protect their children; but Moses’ parents were also motivated by faith. They feared a God they **couldn’t** see more than a king that they **could** see.

The Faith of Moses (Hebrews 11:24-28)

Verse 24 alludes to an incident recorded in Exodus 2:11-15. As a grown man, Moses looked out and “saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brothers.” Moses was so outraged that he killed the Egyptian and buried his body in the sand. Pharaoh eventually learned what Moses had done and sought to kill him. Moses fled to the land of Midian where he lived for the next forty years. The account in Genesis neither sanctions nor condemns Moses killing the Egyptian. Whatever the case, Moses was no longer a member of Pharaoh’s household; he was now identified with the people of God. The author of Hebrews looks at this whole series of events in Moses’ life when he gives this commentary:

24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, 25 choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin,

It would have been much easier for Moses to remain in Pharaoh's household. But by defending the Hebrew slave who was being beaten, he effectively chose to identify with and "endure ill-treatment" with "the people of God." While in Midian God called Moses to confront Pharaoh and then lead the people out of Egypt. This would mean that Moses would experience all the ill-treatment that the children of Israel endured. His fate and their fate would be the same.

This is analogous to something that the first-century Hebrew Christians had experienced. In Hebrews 10:33-34 the author reminded his readers that they had identified with other believers who had been imprisoned for their faith. In this way they had "endured ill-treatment with the people of God." The author reminds them of their past willingness to suffer because some of them were becoming unwilling to pay the price any more. Moses is an example of someone who persevered by faith.

For Moses, remaining in Pharaoh's household would have provided opportunity to enjoy "the passing pleasures of sin." Perhaps some of the pleasures available in Pharaoh's household were inherently sinful (immorality, drunkenness, etc.). Or perhaps it would have been sinful for Moses to enjoy normal pleasures in Pharaoh's household when the Hebrews were enslaved and oppressed.

In either case the pleasures of sin were "passing" - they were fleeting and temporary at best. And so Moses chose to endure ill-treatment with "the people of God." He went from being an insider in Pharaoh's court to being an advocate for and deliverer of the Hebrews. Verse 26 makes an intriguing statement about Moses' faith:

26 considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.

It's interesting how the NT authors wrote about OT events using Christian terms. They understood that Jesus "recapitulated" and fulfilled the major events of the Old Testament. Israel fled to Egypt to be preserved during a famine; Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt when Herod wanted to kill all the baby boys around Bethlehem. Israel, God's "son," was called out of Egypt; Jesus, God's Son, was also called out of Egypt. Israel was tested for 40 years in the wilderness (and was found disobedient); Jesus was tempted for 40 days (and found obedient). The NT (especially Matthew) describes how Jesus recapitulated and fulfilled the history of Israel because Jesus identifies fully with God's people. That being the case, the author of Hebrews can look back and say that since Moses gave up the riches of Egypt to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, he was actually choosing "the reproach of Christ" because Christ is fully identified with the people of God. Moses was like Paul would sought the fellowship of Christ's sufferings.

Beginning in verse 27 the author fast-forwards to "the exodus" in which Moses led the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. If you read the book of Exodus you'll see that Moses' faith wasn't perfect. And his faith grew over time. When God first gave Moses the assignment of leading the people out of Egypt, he second-guessed God quite a bit: "God, are you SURE I'm the person to lead your people out of Egypt? God, have you

ever noticed I'm not a great speaker?" But eventually Moses got to a place of faith. Eventually he came to a place of confidence that would do **through him** what He had promised. Verse 27 is a statement about Moses' mature faith:

27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen.

A whole series of events demonstrated that Moses didn't "fear the wrath of the king": speaking on God's behalf, "Let My people go!"; announcing each of the ten plagues; leading the Israelites to the shore of the Red Sea; etc. Like the Hebrew midwives and like his own parents 80 years earlier, Moses feared God more than he feared the king.

Picking up the description of faith back in 11:1, the author writes, "for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen." The reason Moses endured/persevered through hardship is because he fixed his eyes on God (who is invisible) instead of Pharaoh (who was very visible). Even though he couldn't see Him, he feared God. He had more than enough evidence that God is real and that His opinion and His will mattered more than anybody else's. He feared God above all else. He lived by faith.

Verse 28 makes reference to the last of the ten plagues, the one that finally convinced Pharaoh that he'd never win against God. Just as God commanded, Moses instituted the "passover" whereby each family would kill a lamb and apply the blood to the top and sides of the doorframe.

28 By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them.

When the Lord saw the blood on the doorframe, He "passed over" the household and its members were safe. Where there was no blood, the household experienced the death of the firstborn son. The author of Hebrews doesn't make any parallels here, but Paul writes that "Christ is our Passover" who "has been sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7). When we put our trust in Him, His blood does for us what the passover lamb did for the children of Israel; we experience God's salvation and avoid His wrath.

The Faith of the Children of Israel (Hebrews 11:29) One last incident in Moses' life is mentioned in verse 29.

29 By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though *they were passing* through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.

Exodus 14 records that when the children of Israel were trapped between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea, they were terrified. And (as was their habit) they accused Moses of being incompetent and callous to their plight. That's when Moses said this (Exodus 14:13-14):

13 But Moses said to the people, "Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the Lord which He will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you have

seen today, you will never see them again forever. 14 The Lord will fight for you while you keep silent.”

Moses’ faith stimulated their faith. Even though the children of Israel were full of fear, after God parted the waters, they had enough faith to put one foot in front of the other and walk through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land. By contrast, when the Egyptians tried the very same thing the results were very different. Notice the last statement in verse 29:

29 By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and ***the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.***

This simple observation about the Egyptians illustrates that faith has content; faith involves confidence in God and His word. And so it was faith for the children of Israel to walk through the Red Sea on dry land because God had promised to deliver them. It was foolishness for the Egyptian army to do the same thing because God had promised to fight against them!

In light of everything we’ve seen about faith in this passage, we can conclude that ***Cultivating a healthy “fear of the Lord” will fuel our faith.*** (see Prov. 1:7, 8:13, 14:26-27; Deut. 14:23; Eph 5:21, Col. 3:22, Heb. 4:1, 1 Peter 1:17, 2:17) If we get to the place where we fear God more than we fear anything else, we’ll be poised to walk by faith. Remember that the fear of the Lord is the perspective that says, “The last person I want to ignore and disregard is God. Since God is the wisest, most powerful, most competent and insightful being in the universe, I would be foolish to ignore and disregard what He says. And since God is great AND God is good, what He says is also the very best course for my life.” This is exactly what Proverbs 1:7 tells us.

7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Proverbs repeatedly makes a contrast between those who fear God (and who therefore seek wisdom like it’s pure gold) and those who don’t fear God (and who therefore could care less about God’s perspective on their lives). This is a perspective you need to bring that area of your life in which you need to live by faith. In that area of your life you need to seek wisdom like it’s pure gold. Then you need to take it seriously because it would be dumb to ignore God in that area of your life. Then you need to humbly live it out by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let me close by illustrating what it might look like to cultivate the fear of the Lord in a specific area of our lives. Let’s say (hypothetically, of course) that I look out over this coming week or month and I see that I realize that I have more to do than I can possibly accomplish. As I think about it, I find myself getting anxious and overwhelmed.

At this point I have numerous options, right? I could kill myself trying to get everything done. Or I could go the other direction and self-medicate in about a half-dozen ways; I wouldn’t get anything done, but at least I’d have some pleasure. Or I could turn to the

Scriptures and try to gain God's perspective on my anxiety and fear about the future. I could go to a familiar passage such as Matthew 6 and really listen for the heart of God. Sometimes we go to familiar Scriptures assuming it's stale, old news when in reality we've never actually tried to put it into practice. G.K. Chesterton wrote, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried." That's often the case with a passage like Matthew 6. Here's how I might ponder this passage.

²⁵ "For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, *as to* what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, *as to* what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ "Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and *yet* your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?"

"Oh great, my anxiety makes me want to speed up and get busy, whereas God wants me to slow down. He wants me to 'look at the birds of the air'. . . not just think about birds but actually look at birds and notice how He takes care of them. God wants me to believe - really 'get' - that I am worth more to Him than the birds."

²⁷ "And who of you by being worried can add a *single* hour to his life? ²⁸ "And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, ²⁹ yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. ³⁰ "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is *alive* today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, *will He* not much more *clothe* you? You of little faith!

"Again God wants me to take the time to go look at flowers. Taking that time will be difficult. But perhaps that's part of the problem - the way I think about time. Maybe my anxiety is less a function of having so much to do; maybe it's more a function of not realizing that I'm not alone. Maybe if I really believed in God's personal care for me I wouldn't feel so overwhelmed and hopeless."

³¹ "Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' ³² "For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

"Am I a functional atheist when it comes to anxiety? Do I believe that God will take care of me or do I believe that I'm all alone? Instead of getting busy I need to make sure God's kingdom and righteousness inform everything I do."

³⁴ "So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

"Worrying about tomorrow will rob me of today. I trust that God will care for me tomorrow as least as well as He cares for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field.

God, give me the grace to live this day to the fullest, not missing a single thing you want to do in me or through me. Amen.”

That’s an example of how I might take God seriously. If I fear God I’ll believe that He is that attentive to my needs and that He will care for me. This fear of the Lord should fuel my faith, my confidence in Him.

My encouragement to you this week is to seek God’s wisdom on the area of your life in which you need to learn faith. Take that wisdom seriously - even if you don’t understand it all and even if it seems at odds with your experience. In this way you will cultivate the fear of the Lord in this area of your life. And the fear of the Lord will fuel your faith.