

Fearing God

The December 1990 issue of LIFE magazine had as its cover story “Who is God?” Inside there were twenty-two different interviews of people who gave their answers. They were young and they were old. They were Jewish and Christian and Hindu and Muslim. There was a street criminal from South America, an American baseball player and a Presbyterian minister with AIDS, as well as others included in the list.

Many of the stories were sad. Some were so hopeless, so pathetic, so wrong. Like the story of Ramon Correa, a 21-year-old murderer living in the slums of Medellin, Columbia. He said, “God pardons everyone who seeks him, so pretty much you can do what you want. He is very understanding.”

Many described God’s forgiveness, his love, his kindness and his generosity. Some severely criticized him for the way he runs the world. But no one indicated that they feared God. The closest statement was from Roger Rosenblatt, a 51-year-old editor-at-large and columnist for LIFE, who wrote: “I am not afraid of him, although I know what he is capable of doing.”

Very few people fear God, and yet the Bible says in Psalm 111:10: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Or in Psalm 147:11: “The Lord delights in those who fear him.” Or Proverbs 10:27: “The fear of the Lord adds length to life.” Or Proverbs 6:6: “. . . through the fear of the Lord a man avoids evil.”

Add to that that some of the most extraordinary experiences with God recorded in the Bible include fear. Genesis 3:10 records Adam’s first words to God after he sinned: “I heard you in the garden and I was afraid.” Exodus 3:1-6 recounts the story of Moses out

in the wilderness and his encounter with the burning bush: “Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.” Or Isaiah 6:1-5 where Isaiah had a vision of God and he said, “Woe is me. I am ruined.” In Matthew 17:1-6, on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James and John heard the voice of God and “they fell face down on the ground, terrified.” And then, in Matthew 28:1-4, the guards at Jesus’ tomb saw the angel of the Lord and “were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.”

Let there be no doubt, the Bible teaches that experiencing God includes fearing God. Yet fearing God seems somewhat out of place. It sounds old-fashioned and inappropriate. Today we think of God in terms of love and kindness and goodness and generosity and forgiveness. At times we are even critical and say that God does not do very well at running the world, especially in terms of wars and earthquakes and terminal illnesses and poverty.

We have a “designer God” whom we have shaped in our own image. We think of God as a pet, a puppet or a parent. We have very specific expectations of him – just as we have specific expectations of

cars, houses, jobs and marriages. And, we can become angry, disappointed and disillusioned with God when our expectations are not met. In fact, if God doesn’t do it “our way”, we won’t be his friend or go to his church anymore. We almost act as if God is frightened by our threats.

We must understand that God is God! In Psalm 100:3 we read, “Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us and not we ourselves.”

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God is all-knowing; he is all-powerful; he is absolutely sovereign. He is the “Boss” with a capital “B”. He sets the terms. Therefore, fear is not a totally inappropriate response!

But, what does it mean to “fear” God?

Fear means “awe”. It used to be that if I used the word “awe” I would have to explain it to those who were young. That is not necessary today because “awesome” is so much a part of every younger person’s vocabulary. I talked this week to a second grader who told me that her teacher is “awesome”. It is the ultimate compliment for good.

The dictionary definition of “awe” is “the power to inspire dread or fear.” “Awe” means the biggest, the best, the most spectacular. “Awe” has to do with that which really impresses us.

On a vacation to Alaska our family drove through Denali National Park on our way from Anchorage to Fairbanks. It was there that we saw Mount McKinley. At 20, 320 feet it is the tallest mountain in North America. It is stunning. Astonishing. It is awesome!

To experience God is awesome. We can’t take him in. He is that big. He is that great. We encounter him and we are stunned. We are breathless. We are flabbergasted. We are astonished. We are amazed at this God. There are no words to describe him. We are overwhelmed by his infinite size, his unlimited power, his incredible beauty, his everything.

Never let there be a day that goes by when God becomes ordinary . . . when we take him for granted, when we say, “Oh my God!” over a sales price at K-Mart. Never let there be a moment when we are anything less than awe-struck by God!

To experience God we must fear God, and fear means “awe”.

But fear means more than that. Fear also means respect. That means always treating someone or something as different and special, and with great care.

I grew up not far from the Atlantic Ocean, and to this day I love the sea. I could look at it for hours. It is never the same. I delight in the smell of salt air. I enjoy riding its waves. It’s wonderful! But, I must never treat the ocean that I love routinely, for it also has the power to destroy me.

Years ago, when our older children were quite young, Charleen and the children and I took my father’s 20 foot boat out of Florida’s Inter-coastal Waterway and into the ocean . . . and I lost sight of land. I was afraid because I know the ocean’s size and power and depth and the smallness of the boat on which I traveled and my own weakness and inadequacy. It was the fear of respect. And frankly, I count such fear to be a good thing, especially in a crisis.

Have you ever been aboard a submarine? I have. Several times I have been aboard a submarine that is in the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. It is a captured U-boat. I think it is the only submarine that has ever been captured in all of naval history. And I have read Tom Clancy’s bestseller, THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER. From my visits to the museum and from my reading and the information I have gotten from others, I have learned that there is no wasted space aboard submarines. In fact, they have what is called a “hot bunk” rotation. As I understand it, that means that there are one-third the number of bunks as there are crew members aboard a submarine. When one crew member gets out of a bunk it is somebody else’s turn to use that bunk and have it for eight hours, but it is still warm from the body heat of the last person who was there.

In spite of the need for conserving space on a submarine, the captain dines alone in his own private dining room. There is a reason for that. There needs to be respect for a commanding officer when the crisis comes and the depth charges are exploding all around

you. Then respect is more important than either familiarity or friendship.

So it is with God. He is our friend, and that is very good. But he is still God. He is still feared. He is still distant even though he is close. He is respected because he is the Commander upon whom we must depend when the battles are the fiercest, the depth charges are shaking us and heaven and hell hang in the balance.

To experience God we must fear God, and fear means respect.

But the bottom line is that fear means fear. I can think of no other word. It is more than awe. It is more than respect. It is actually being afraid.

Fear is the sense of a greater power, one that can determine what happens to us, and we are too weak to do anything about it. Fear. As in an earthquake or a tornado or a blizzard or cancer or police or electricity or death.

God has power over us that we cannot overrule. That is why dealing with God is such a serious and frightening thing. It is why we dare not take lightly his commands or our sins.

I hear people say, "I'll believe in Jesus Christ when I want to." "So what if I have an abortion; it's my body." "I don't care what God or anybody else says, as long as I'm happy." Or, "I'll just go ahead and sin, and then I'll ask God to forgive me."

We are not dealing with some petty public official or the referee in the neighborhood basketball game. We're talking about God! He doesn't need to put up with such garbage. He is God! He has the power to blow us away. And fearing God is a very smart thing to do!

If God did not love us, we would be destroyed by fear. But, this God whom we fear we can also love. Love and fear are not mutually exclusive.

I love my wife more than words can tell. And I know that she loves me. Yet, part of

that love is the fear of ever losing her. So, out of love and out of fear, I treat her in ways to keep her.

Likewise, I love God more than words can tell. And I know that God loves me. Yet, I fear God, too . . . and rightly so, for I would never want to do anything to lose him or to have his power used against me.

If all of this sounds very serious, it's because it is very serious. I doubt that we preach or we hear a sermon in a thousand about fearing God. Lots on love, and rightly so. But fearing God is also essential to experiencing God.

St. Paul said it best when he wrote to Christians in II Corinthians 5:10-11:

We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men."

And so I try to persuade you. I try to persuade you to know Jesus Christ as Savior. To love God with all your heart, mind and soul. And to fear God . . . for he is awesome; he commands our respect; he is God!

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