



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION
WASHINGTON, DC

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

Judges 6:36-7:23

Dan Claire

October 15, 2017

Let's think about fear. "Do not be afraid" is a frequent refrain in the Bible, occurring more than one hundred times in one form or another. Jesus often said this to his disciples. So it's not uncommon for Christians to think that all fear is wrong, even though the Bible never says this. Fear is a God-given, normal part of life. We learn fear from an early age, and it's what keeps us from getting into mishaps or from being mistreated by others. Yet fear is *morally neutral*. It can motivate us to do the right thing, and it can also hinder us from doing what's right as well. In and of itself, fear is neither good nor evil. It is how we respond to fear that can be either right or wrong.

Fear and *trust* as two sides of the same coin in the Bible. Hebrew poetry often aligns two synonymous ideas in parallel, and in the case of Proverbs 29:25 it's *fear* and *trust*:

The fear of man lays a snare,
but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe.

In this proverb, fear and trust are interchangeable. Fear of man = trust in man. Trust in the Lord = fear of the Lord.

What's the point of this proverb? It doesn't say that fear is wrong; rather, it's how we respond to fear that matters. The meaning of the proverb is simple: when our fear of man exceeds our fear of the Lord, we are at risk of being snared, trapped and enslaved.

You don't have to travel far to be confronted by the fear of man. It's powerfully at work all around us. If you want to feel the full force of the fear of man, you need only stand up at school, or at work, or in your neighborhood, and say that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6).

According to the most recent demographic data, Christians remain in the majority in the United States. While these data show that seven in ten Americans identify as Christians, it certainly feels like most are Christians in name only. Kids from our church often feel like they're the only person in their class who believes in Jesus. They legitimately fear that if their teachers or classmates find out about their faith, they will be ridiculed and punished. Adults in our church often feel pressured to conform to popular opinion on everything from casual sex to the

absurdity of deeply held religious convictions. They legitimately fear that if their employers or coworkers find out about their faith, they may never get another raise or promotion. Some people in our church haven't been hired or have lost their jobs because of their faith. For these reasons, "fear of man" isn't irrational; it's a survival skill learned during childhood.

Again, the Bible doesn't say that fear of man is wrong. What it does say, however, is that whenever our fear of man exceeds our fear of the Lord, we are at risk of being trapped and enslaved.

GIDEON: FROM THE FEAR OF MAN TO THE FEAR OF THE LORD

Stories from Palestine during the period of the Judges might as well be about life on another planet, as alien as they feel to us in the modern world. Yet if we look beyond the cultural differences what we find are people who are controlled by fear. Consequently, their struggles are very similar to ours today.

Gideon was an ordinary guy. Like most everyone else in town, he and his family were Hebrews in name only. They still held on to the old stories of divine deliverance from Egypt, but they had very little memory of the God of their ancestors. Daily life in the Promised Land required a steady supply of things we often take for granted today but were insecure in those days. For example, they needed fertility, because without it no new people or animals would be born. They also needed rain, because without it agriculture would fail, and the people and animals would all die. Most of their Canaanite neighbors worshiped a god named Baal as the god of fertility and water. Over the years that they lived as neighbors, the Hebrews also adopted this practice. Hebrews who didn't worship Baal might be ridiculed and punished, because their nonconformity threatened the prosperity of the community. As long as Gideon and his family kept sacrificing to Baal, they could expect security in the forms of fertility, water, and the approval of their neighbors.

However, their security didn't last. Their neighbors the Midianites—the very people who had introduced them to Baal—started raiding and pillaging their land. Each year the Midianites would swarm in like locusts and consume most all of the Israelites' grain and livestock, leaving them to survive only on barley and the few animals they could keep hidden. After seven consecutive years, the Israelites cried out to their old deliverer, the God of Abraham and Moses, to come to the rescue again. He didn't; at least, not immediately. First God sent his prophet to explain why the Midianites were oppressing them. The prophet said that it was because the Israelites had feared the wrong god. Rather than putting their fear in the Lord, they had feared Baal instead.

After sending the prophet, God began raising up Gideon to deliver his people. Gideon's story is the longest story in the book of Judges, perhaps because Gideon required so much advance preparation. In Judges 6 we saw how Gideon came to faith through the tender, deliberate kindness of the Lord. Four times God assured Gideon that he would stay with him. Then when Gideon eventually realized that it really, truly was the Lord he was speaking with, he got scared,

and that was a good thing! It meant that the fear of the Lord had returned to Israel—or at least to one person in Israel. God then sent Gideon to tear down his father's altar to Baal. For this, Gideon became known as Jerubbaal, i.e. the man who fought Baal. Then, as the Midianites and their allies swarmed back into Israel, "the Spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon" (6:34) and he called the northern tribes to come join him and prepare for battle. Very clearly God's patient generosity had paid off, transforming Gideon from an ordinary guy—a Hebrew in name only—to a mighty man of valor (6:12).

One particularly reassuring aspect of Gideon's story is that he still struggled with fear. Just because Gideon had learned the fear of the Lord doesn't mean that all his other fears had disappeared.

I wish I could tell you that I fear the Lord with undivided loyalty, but I still buckle under the fear of man more often than I would care to admit. That's what makes Gideon's story especially relevant for us today. Even though Gideon had come to faith, there was still more work to be done in bringing his fear of man into submission under his fear of the Lord.

In the rest of Gideon's story, we will see more of God's tender, deliberate kindness in helping Gideon to overcome his fears, one by one. As we continue with the story, consider what God is saying to you as well about learning to trust him.

YOU CAN TRUST IN GOD'S SUPREMACY (Judges 6:36-40)

Gideon's experiment with the fleece (6:36-40) was a test of God's supremacy over the dew and the rain. Even though Gideon had come to fear the Lord, he was nevertheless unsure about God's supremacy. The old stories told of the Lord's triumph over the gods of the Egyptians. But in recent years, Gideon's family and neighbors had come to believe that it was Baal who controlled the dew and the rain, upon which all life depended. So Gideon naturally wondered whether the Lord would truly be able to help him with the things that mattered most.

Thankfully, few of us today have had to worry about water. But we do feel insecure in plenty of other areas. Sure, Jesus can deliver me from eternal destruction, but what about a lifetime of loneliness, or insignificance, or addiction? Is he strong enough to provide for my needs right now, as well in the afterlife? We may not worry about the same things as Gideon, but we do worry in the same ways that he did, wondering about our other religious options. "What if I made the wrong choice? What if our Father isn't Almighty?" To us, and to Gideon, the Lord says in reply, "Look no further. You can trust in my supremacy. I have everything you need."

Gideon's experiment with the fleece is often wrongly interpreted as a model for decision-making. Well-meaning Christians will say that if you don't know God's will about something, then you should "lay out a fleece!" Following this advice, however, has often resulted in foolish or even disastrous decisions.

Gideon's experiment with the fleece isn't recorded in the Bible as a model for decision-making. Rather, its purpose is to demonstrate that our God is Lord over everything, including the things that matter most. It is our God, not Baal, who is Lord of the dew and the rain. Upon awakening that first morning, Gideon found the ground dry and his fleece wet (6:38). Aha! A good sign. But come to think of it, not a perfect experiment because of the humidity. So, "please Lord," Gideon asked, "might I run the opposite experiment tonight?" That next morning the fleece was dry, and the ground was wet (6:40). On both occasions God was saying, "Look no further. You can trust in my supremacy. I have everything you need."¹

YOU CAN TRUST IN GOD'S POWER (Judges 7:1-8)

It often feels like nobody else at school or at work or in the neighborhood believes in Jesus. So how can Christianity be true when we're so outnumbered?

Gideon struggled with the same concern in Judges 7. The Midianites and their allies were 135,000 strong. Even though the fleece experiment had gone well, Gideon had to have been pretty concerned when only 32,000 of his kinsmen came to help him. One Hebrew for every four Midianites was terrible odds. No wonder they called the place where the Hebrews gathered Ein Harod (7:1). Harod is the same word that is translated "fear" in Prov 29:25, i.e. the "harod" or *fear* of man. It is more often translated *trembling*. Thus, the place where Gideon and his men had gathered was the "spring of trembling."

At the same time, it was also a spring of fresh water, and Gideon had just learned of the Lord's supremacy over water. So it was with this sign of God's supremacy that the Lord began to teach Gideon about his power. He commanded Gideon to pare down his troops further, so that Israel could not boast that their deliverance had come by their own strength (7:2). Gideon sent home from Ein Harod (the spring of trembling) all those who were "fearful and trembling," such that only 10,000 remained (7:3). The odds had just gotten a lot worse.

God still wasn't finished: "The people are still too many," he said (7:4). This time, God commanded Gideon to dismiss all those who bowed down to drink from the spring, while retaining those who lapped it up like dogs. There's a lot of debate about the symbolism here, and I tend to think that the posture of those who bend down is somehow associated with Baal worship. But regardless of whether that's correct, the outcome remains the same: 9,700 kneelers went home, and only 300 lappers remained (7:7). Now they were outnumbered 450:1.

¹ As you read through the Old Testament, note the many references to water, whether in river or sea or storms, in light of the theological tug-of-war between Baal and the God of Israel. True Israelites believed that it was the Lord, not Baal, who could open the floodgates, or part the Red Sea, or bring years of drought on the people who followed Baal. In other words, what Gideon was learning with the fleece is a lesson that gets repeated many, many times throughout the entire Old Testament. Every time it comes up, the message is the same: you can trust in God's supremacy, not only over water, but over everything we need, and all the things that matter most.

There's another famous story in 1 Kings 18 about the prophet Elijah, who after three years of drought faced off against 450 prophets of Baal. In that story, it was Elijah's sacrifice to the Lord, rather than the one made to Baal, that led to the end of the drought. Gideon's story will end the same way.

These stories have the same underlying message: you can trust in God's power. In paring his troops down to 300, God was teaching Gideon—and us—that even if you're outnumbered 450:1, you still mustn't fear the strength of the opposition. We walk by faith, not by sight. If the Lord were to open our eyes to see the strength of his army, all our fears would disappear, "for those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (2 Kings 6:16). What tips the scales is not the size of the opposition, but the presence of the Lord. As John wrote, "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). No matter how many reject the Lord, no matter how large the opposition, if you are with the Lord, then you can trust in his power.

YOU CAN TRUST IN GOD'S GUIDANCE (Judges 7:9-14)

Gideon had come to fear the Lord, but his fear of man was still an ongoing challenge. At this point in the story, while he had been assured of God's supremacy, he was facing terrible odds, and probably was wondering, "Am I crazy? Did I hear God correctly in sending everyone home? Am I a blind fool, leading these 300 men to their doom, all because of my own misplaced religious zeal?" Gideon needed confirmation that he could trust in God's guidance.

God did not tell him to "lay out a fleece." Instead, God recognized the possibility that Gideon might still be afraid, and he invited him to go spy on his enemies before taking action (7:10). Gideon did, and he overheard two Midianite soldiers talking. The first said, "I dreamt that a barley cake rolled into our camp and overturned our tent" (7:13). This would have gotten Gideon's attention, because barley was the poor man's wheat, and very likely the only grain the Hebrews had left after the Midianite raids. Then the second man interpreted the dream, "This must have been the sword of Gideon, for God has given us all into his hands" (7:14). At that, we read that Gideon bowed down and worshiped the Lord, and then he returned to rouse his troops for battle.

What Gideon gained down among the Midianites was not merely a prophetic picture regarding the outcome of the battle. He also was reminded that the Midianites walked by faith as well. While God had been at work in Gideon's heart, he had also been at work in the hearts of the Midianites. Before they met the Israelites on the battlefield, the Midianites were already defeated in spirit. So Gideon was able to see that his army of 300 would be enough. It was confirmation that he could indeed trust in God's guidance. He returned to Ein Harod assured of victory. He roused his men and led them into the Midianite camp armed with ram's horn trumpets, and torches, and jars made of clay. Dispersed throughout the Midianite camp, they sounded their trumpets, broke their jars, and lifted high their torches, shouting "For the Lord and for Gideon." With that, the Midianites either turned on one another, or turned and ran. Gideon and his men enjoyed a massive, miraculous rout of their Midianite oppressors, by none other than the hand of God.

WHOEVER TRUSTS IN JESUS WILL BE SAFE

We often forget that everyone is a believer in something. If you come to faith in Jesus, you're leaving some other faith behind. Likewise, if you reject Jesus in order to join the secular mainstream, you're very much putting your faith and fear in something else. Rest assured that you will be led by whatever you fear most. Should you choose the gods of our secular age, they will guide your steps, and they will be just as ruthless and unrelenting in their demands as any gods of the ancient world. No god will be satisfied with anything less than all of you.

"The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe" (Prov 29:25). If you'll take time to read the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), you'll see why this is true. Nothing can stop Jesus. He controls the wind and the waves. He can walk on water, and change water into wine. He can heal any disease, and even brings people back from the dead. He conquers evil spirits, and restores madmen to sanity. He overcomes injustice, confronts hypocrisy, and calls wicked tyrants to account. Even when he was blamed for our sins, and crucified in our stead, he conquered sin and death and was resurrected on the third day. "Therefore," as Paul writes, "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2:9-11).

No one else can offer us such lasting security, both in the present and in eternity. Jesus has already won every battle. His victory is certain. He is building his church out of all those who trust and fear in him, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). Cast all your cares upon him, because he cares for you (1 Peter 5:7).