

*What Really Matters, Pt. 4*  
***Fear the LORD!***  
*Ecclesiastes 12: 13-14; Proverbs 9:10; 14: 26-27*

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Ecclesiastes spends 11 chapters reflecting on how vain and fleeting is our life, little more than a chasing after wind. But then it concludes: *Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.* The meaning in our short lives can be found in fearing the God who made us. The book of Proverbs is about the search for wisdom. It explores how to live well the days that we have. Proverbs famously declares: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* Later it goes even farther to assert, *The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life.* In the Bible, fearing God is at the heart of duty, wisdom and a source for life.

But that's a bit problematic. I don't relate well to the idea of fearing God. I don't want to be scared and I don't like thinking that God gets some kind of weird pleasure making people tremble because he can do stuff to them. The fear of the LORD conjures ideas of bullies and tyrants, of petty rules and iron constraints. I'd rather ignore this idea of fearing God. But obviously my distorted view is not what Scripture means by the fear of the LORD. Fearing God is associated in the Bible with all the things I long for: to have a fountain of life that ever refreshes, to know what makes for living well, and to do what I was made for and so find fulfillment. If I want those things, I'm going to have to figure out what the Bible really means by fearing God.

I'll just tell you where I hope we'll end up, and then we'll work through getting there. Rightly understood, the fear of the LORD means realizing every moment that God is the one with whom I have to do. The Triune God is Reality. Apart from him is illusion. The Triune God is life. Apart from him is death. The Triune God is love. Apart from him is empty, selfish chaos. Fearing this God means living aware that I am prone to wander from God and this wandering can ruin my life and the lives of others. Fearing God means realizing every moment that growthful, healthy, loving life is only found in pressing towards God in faith and trust. As we explore this, I have a story for you.



Last year, two of our younger cousins attempted to free climb Devil's Tower in Wyoming. A sacred site for Native Americans, Teddy Roosevelt declared it our first national monument and Steven Spielberg used it for the climax to his movie, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Devil's Tower protrudes out of the prairie in the Black Hills. It's 867 sheer feet from its base to its top, a very serious hunk of rock.



Danielle and Christian set out with a guide. Last fall, Danielle described for me her encounter with fear on the rock. She's an adventurer who loves both Jesus and adrenaline. She said, "Describing what its like to climb Devils Tower is almost as difficult as actually climbing it! Standing at the bottom, before the day has broken, looking up at this amazing rock formation the Lord created you're simply struck with wonder and in my case

adrenaline and absolute joy. My heart pounded in the best way as we prepared our ropes and secured our helmets. Anticipation and excitement seeped through my very being.



"Then we began to climb. It wasn't until about the third pitch, which isn't even close to half way, that I was gripped with fear. From the ledge I could still see the bottom below, and above I saw the vertical climb with what seemed like nowhere to put my hands and feet. Doubt sank in for my first time. Can I make it? Am I

capable? Will my brother have to turn around if I fail to complete this pitch? The first few yards were ok with one foot wedged into a crack creeping up the tower. But when it veered too far away I had to put my feet on *nothing*. I already felt like I was hanging onto absolutely nothing, and when I looked up there was even *less* to grab hold of! In that moment as I used my fingertips to cling to sheer rock, doubt turned to stifling fear.

“In my head, I knew I wouldn't fall to my death because of our ropes. But I still feared that I would. So I just froze, clinging to nothing as tears sprang into my eyes. I looked up, defeated and scared. This mountain was too much for me. I had failed. I whimpered to my guide that I couldn't do it. He told me to take a deep breath, relax and just reach for the next finger hold. I took a few breaths and reached. The next thing I knew I was on the next ledge, gasping to catch my breath and trying to drink enough water to remove the taste of bile that had sprung up in those moments of sheer terror. I love all things adrenaline, but that was the most afraid I've ever been.”



“We continued our climb that day with a mix of fear, excitement, exhaustion, joy and wonder. My brother and I reached the top and had a few moments alone. Once again tears sprung to my eyes and this time spilled over. We made it. Overcoming obstacles, using every ounce of physical and mental strength I had, I was sitting on top of Devil's Tower! So thankful to the Lord for creating something so strange and wonderful for us to enjoy and use to challenge ourselves. A creation that compels you to rely on loved one and strangers for safety. A magnificent rock that pushed me past my limit and made me trust completely in Him.”

On Devil's Tower, Danielle experienced the fear of the LORD and the love of the LORD. Hanging by your finger tips hundreds of feet high puts you in the immediate presence of things too great for you. This rock is huge, beyond us, more than we are. Gravity is real. We'd be fools to disregard its truth: I could plummet like a stone. My strength is nothing compared to these forces. Fear paralyzed Danielle mid climb. But she did not hate the mountain, or God who made it. Or gravity. Or the challenge. Danielle embraced the encounter of her smallness with Reality's greatness. Life is about so much more than our little bubble. And on top, she loved the LORD, the LORD who created such a real, fearful world. The LORD who loved her and gave her strength. The LORD who is loved precisely through our sheer fear of his immensity.

We noted at the start that the fear of the LORD means realizing that God is the one with whom we have to do. He is Reality. To deny or forget this is as foolish as defying gravity. To be angry at God's Reality is as silly as being angry that we breathe air. Let's push a bit further into the negative side of the fear of the LORD before we turn toward it's positive. In Luke, Jesus said to the people: “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing

more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him, who after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him” (12:4-5).

People in Jesus’ day lived in fear. Roman soldiers occupied their cities. At any time the worship of the LORD could be shut down. Taxation was brutal. Resistance could get you crucified. Think of the fear factor if driving home today, you passed a dozen crosses on either side with people hanging dead who had been killed by the government. More, the religious officials laid heavy moral burdens on the people, threatening that no Messiah could come until the people got their spiritual acts together. The Pharisees made it seem like the present distress was the people’s fault. They lived afraid.

We’re also a fearful people. The pandemic exposed just how shaky is our hope in the life to come. We’re terrified of physical dying. We’re terrified of losing our comforts. We’re frightened to say what is true because we could lose jobs. We fear losing our social reputations. We slink away and let absurdities reign because we’re scared to resist. We fear everything except God.

Look, said Jesus, do not fear those who can merely kill the body. Fear God who after he has killed can cast your soul into hell. That gets your attention! And raises your hackles. We forget that Jesus was the scariest teacher that ever lived. Gentle? What’s gentle about “He who calls his brother a fool will be liable to the hell of fire” (Mt. 5:22)? What’s safe about the man who said, “Many will say ‘Lord, Lord’ and I will reply, “I never knew you. Depart from me”” (Mt. 7: 22-23). Nobody scares me more than Jesus. And he meant to strike fear in us, to burst our bubble of safety so we could come awake to Reality.

The fear of the LORD means realizing that God is the one with whom we have to do. He is Reality. And we are accountable to God for what we do with the lives he gave us. One of the greatest, most faithful believers ever was the apostle Paul. He knew grace, but he also said, “We must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others” (2 Cor. 5: 10-11). Paul knew the fear of the LORD. It motivated him. He knew that as created beings, we are accountable to the Creator for what we do with the lives he gave us.

We’re all climbing on the rock, the LORD’s tower. And that rock is immense, immoveable, more real than we are. We’re responsible for our climb. Forgetting the Reality of this rock, forgetting gravity, can lead to a plummet into

death. More than gravity or air, the LORD I Am is the one we need, the one true center of our life and purpose. He is the one in control, not me. Fearing him means submitting my life to his sovereignty. It means lining my life up with his will and reality, conforming myself to him, not asking God to conform himself to my ideas of what Reality should be.

A gentler, but powerful, way to look at this is to consider what life would be like without God. After the sins of adultery and murder, a desperate, fearful David cried out, “Cast me not away from your presence. Take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of your salvation!” (Ps. 51: 11-12). Elsewhere David prayed, “I have no good apart from you” (Ps. 16: 2). Jesus echoed that psalm when he told his disciples, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15: 5). So many times I am secretly thinking “Not God’s will, but my will be done.” But that’s like unclipping myself from the ropes and climbing Devil’s Tower without looking where I’m reaching. Doom is sure to follow. And what if God let me do that? What if he said, “OK, have it your way, I’m outta here. You want life without me? I’m gone.” I fear being without God, because I know he is my life. So often I ignore the sweetness of the presence of the Holy Spirit in my heart. I take him for granted. But what if he left? The emptiness is terrifying. I fear life apart from God because I know enough to know how badly I would screw things up. I know that nothing lasting comes from my ambition and selfish pursuits. Apart from him I can do nothing. The fear of the LORD arises from starkly realizing the Reality: without God there is only the hell of my own devising.

Next week, we’re going to look at the positive act of trusting in the LORD as the way of getting joyfully aligned with his Reality. Today, let’s conclude my noting the overwhelming positive results from a healthy fear of the LORD. We often read Isaiah 11 at Christmas time because it is a prophecy of the coming Messiah. But we often overlook how important fearing the LORD is to the Messiah himself. Isaiah prophesied about Jesus, “The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD” (Is. 11: 2-3).

Jesus delighted in the fear of the LORD! It was his joy to realize that his Father is the one his life was all about. His Father is the Rock of Reality. His Father is the source of all joy and wisdom and purpose. For us as sinners bent on our will, the fear of the LORD seems only negative. It scares us and we want to run from him. But should we turn and submit our agenda to his Reality, the fear of the LORD leads us to delight. We get in sync with Reality. We begin climbing the Rock and discovering the wonder of living with his breath breathing through us,

his power undergirding us, and his light leading us. The fear of the LORD is indeed the beginning of wisdom, because by it we sync up with the one who is Life in himself. The fear of the LORD is indeed the whole duty of man because it opens our eyes to what matters most. The fear of the LORD is the fountain of life, because we're lifted out of ourselves, out of the stale pool of our own bathwater, into the refreshing, flowing source of all life and good. It's worth the climb!

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For a clear and in-depth look at the Biblical meaning of the fear of the LORD, check out Mike Reeve's new book *Rejoice and Tremble*. It was a great undergirding for this message.

