

Obedience Sustained by Awe (Deuteronomy 5:22-6:3)**Matthew Williams****4/23/2023**

There is a glory beyond this world you and I can scarcely fathom. There is an infinite majesty, a radiant splendor, the universe cannot contain. Before anything else existed, he was there. Before time itself began, he was there.

Why do I say he? Because the God who created the world and everything in it is not a spiritual essence that is one with the cosmos or enveloped by the cosmos. He is transcendent, set apart, self-existent, contingent on nothing and no one outside himself. He is not an immaterial force, a religious concept, or a logical consequence of human reasoning that requires an unmoved mover to set the world in motion. He is a magnificently personal being who enjoys perfect community within himself as one God in three persons – Father, Son, and Spirit.

He is not the proverbial “Man upstairs,” the elephant of which every faith sees a part, or a souped-up version of you and me. He doesn't owe you. He does not answer to you. And he did not create you because he needed you. From eternity past, he has been completely and fully and perfectly satisfied with all that he is and does. His ways are perfect. His deeds are righteous. His wisdom is unassailable. His power is supreme.

And here's the incredible thing. None of that is a human opinion, hypothesis, or make believe. That is precisely what God has told us about himself. How so? Because he's more than a God who is there. He's the God who speaks. Psalms 135:15–16, “The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak...”

Who is the True and Living God in contrast? Psalms 103:7, “He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.” How did he do it? Through the power of his voice. Exodus 19:9, “And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.’” Isaiah 40:8, “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” He reveals himself to us, he causes us to stand in awe of his splendor and majesty, through the words that proceed from his mouth. And that is exactly how Moses wants Israel to understand the ten commandments.

In Deuteronomy 5:22, Moses has just finished reminding Israel of the ten words, or commandments, that function as the foundation for the entire rest of the law. He's in the middle of the second of four sermons he delivered shortly before he died, preparing Israel to enter the land God promised to give them. The purpose of his sermon is found in verse 33. "You shall be careful to walk in all the way that the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you shall possess." Careful obedience leading to life, joy, and peace is the goal.

But obeying God's Word is hard, isn't it? We stumble and fall. We know what we're supposed to do yet do the exact opposite. What will compel us to persevere? Is there anything that will keep you, no less than Israel, from saying, "You know what? It's too much work. I quit."? Here's the key, my friends. When you are gripped by a vision of the glory of God, you will be careful to obey the Word of God.

Moses has just reminded Israel of the essence of the law. But having done so, he immediately directs their gaze back to the glory of the Lawgiver that they might stand in awe of him. For it is those who live in awe of God's glory who persevere in obeying his Word. God hasn't changed, my friends. If we can see in our own day, through the eyes of faith, what Israel saw on that day, we too will be compelled to keep God's commands. So what must we see?

1) THE VOICE OF GOD REVEALS THE SPLENDOR OF HIS GLORY (5:22-27)

Look at verse 22. "These words," the ten commandments, The LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain..." The entire nation heard them as they were gathered around Mt. Sinai. The Lord didn't speak to one or two people and leave it up to them to convince the rest. He personally addressed all of them. And how did they know it was the Lord speaking? Because the mountain was covered with fire, clouds, and thick darkness.

Mountains represent the dwelling place of God, where heaven and earth meet. Fire represents the consuming holiness and purity of his presence. Thick darkness communicates the unfathomable depth of his majesty. God is present, yet not fully seen or completely grasped by human perception. But where their sight was limited, their hearing was not.

The LORD spoke "With a loud voice." We're not talking about one or two people having an impression or a sense that God was saying something. It was arresting. It was clear.

His voice could not be overlooked, tuned out, or ignored. “And he added no more.” His words were wholly and completely sufficient. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone to communicate their permanent and enduring character. The entire experience was a gift from the Lord to his people.

And when Israel heard God’s voice what did she do? Did she begin live streaming or open a picnic basket and say, “It’s about time this God we’ve been following had a conversation with us.” No! Verse 23. As soon as they heard God’s voice “Out of the midst of the darkness,” every tribe sent their elders and chief men to Moses begging to leave. Why? Because they feared for their life.

They saw God’s “Glory and greatness.” They came face to face with his manifest presence. They heard his voice “Out of the midst of the fire.” And the wonder, the marvel, the awe that immediately filled their hearts was not, “Wow, God actually speaks!” or “Cool, keep going, Lord. I’m learning all kinds of things.” Verse 24, “Behold...this day we have seen God speak with man, and man still live.”

Have you ever had a near-death experience? Time slows down. Every second feels like a precious gift. You can’t believe you’re still alive. When Israel heard the Lord’s voice, that’s exactly what she felt. In the depth of her soul, at the core of her being, she immediately knew, “He’s not like us. He’s holy. We’re not. We don’t belong here. We can’t stay here.” Verse 25, “For this great fire will consume us.”

Therein lies the moral foundation of the universe and the only sure hope for all who are oppressed. There is a Righteous Judge, seated in heaven, who will not let the guilty go unpunished. The fire was certainly terrifying. But it was the voice that made their hearts tremble. “If we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, we shall die.” This is not a safe place. This is an exceedingly dangerous place.

Why were they filled with fear at the voice of God? Because his voice revealed the splendor of his glory. His Word imparted something of the weight of his divine nature and it crushed them. Like the prophet Isaiah, they were undone. Friends, God still communicates the weight of his glory through his Word. The Apostle Peter had some pretty spectacular spiritual experiences. But after all he saw, all he witnessed with his eyes, it was the wonder of God’s Word that gripped his soul.

2 Peter 1:19–21, “And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of

Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

The same power, the same glory, that terrified Israel at Mt. Sinai is bound up in the words of Scripture you hold in your hand. The God of Jacob still speaks. When you wake up in the morning and read God's Word or drive in your car and listen to God's Word, you are not reading inspirational material. You are not listening to moral guidelines. You are not studying a religious textbook or a set of doctrines or tips for a successful life. You are being personally addressed by the voice of the Living God. 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is breathed out by God." The Word of God reveals the splendor of his glory.

2) THE FEAR OF GOD COMPELS US TO DRAW NEAR WITH TREMBLING JOY (5:27-31)

The request Israel makes in response to hearing God's voice is instructive. Verse 27, Moses, you "Go near and hear all that the LORD our God will say and speak to us all that the LORD our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it." What do they instinctively know they need? They need a mediator! In the words of Job, we need someone who can lay his hand on us both. We cannot continue to commune with God directly. We will die. Moses, do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

How would you expect the Lord to respond to their request? What would many of the songs on Christian radio suggest? "Come on, guys. You're overreacting. I'm not like that at all. I'm a nice guy who welcomes everyone. It's a judgment-free zone. You have me completely wrong!" No. What does the Lord say in verse 27? "They are right." "They are right in all that they have spoken."

You're convinced the fire of my holiness will consume you? You're right. You stand in my presence and wonder why you're still alive? So you should. You hear the Words of my mouth and tremble at my voice? Good. You feel undone before the weight of my glory? You perceive me for who I really am. Verse 29, "Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me..."

What sort of fear is the Lord talking about? It wasn't a terror that made Israel want to have nothing to do with God. It was a reverential awe that trembled before the weight of his glory, captivated her heart, and made her eager to hear and do his commands.

It's the polar opposite of the casual attitude we so readily adopt toward the Lord. An attitude that saunters into church on Sunday morning, unconcerned if you're late,

mumbles through the words of some songs, dozes or plays games on your smartphone through most of the sermon, and scoots out as quickly as possible when the service ends. Because there are a whole lot of other things that feel more valuable, more significant, more satisfying than God.

Friend, if that's you, humble yourself and recognize the problem is not that God is boring. The problem is that you are deaf and blind. You're like a man with earplugs at the symphony or a woman wearing a blindfold on the edge of the Grand Canyon. The problem is not that there's nothing to hear or see. The God with whom you have to do is infinitely glorious! Greater than you can imagine! The problem is that the god of this world has blinded your eyes so you can't see and dulled your ears so you cannot hear.

Do not content yourself with going through spiritual motions. Checking the Sunday attendance box, when you know full well your heart is dead and cold toward the Lord. Ask God to help you see. Ask God to help you hear. There's a reason King Solomon says in Proverbs 1:7, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge..." If you do not fear the Lord or stand in awe of who he is, then you do not know him for who he is.

Michael Reeves (Rejoice and Tremble), "Overwhelmed by his goodness and majesty and holiness and grace and righteousness – by all that God is – the faithful tremble. The biblical theme of the fear of God helps us to see the sort of love toward God that is fitting. It shows us that God does not want passionless performance or a vague preference for him. To encounter the living, holy, and all-gracious God truly means that we cannot contain ourselves. He is not a truth to be known unaffectedly, or a good to be received listlessly. Seen clearly, the dazzling beauty and splendor of God must cause our hearts to quake."

Keep in mind, God is not talking about Israel being afraid of him. Some of you know what that feels like. You're keeping all the rules on the outside, but it's only because you are terrified of getting on God's bad side. You don't want to get in trouble. That's not the fear of the Lord. That's being afraid of the Lord. That's trying to stay off his radar, wishing he would go away.

No, the fear of the Lord is completely different. It's the trembling joy, the awe we experience when our souls are captivated by the wonder of who he is. Moses' response to Israel in Exodus 20:20 as she stood before Mt. Sinai reveals the difference. "Moses said to the people, 'Do not fear (or be afraid), for God has come to test you, that the fear of him (reverent awe) may be before you, that you may not sin.'"

In that moment, as she heard God's voice, Israel experienced the fear of the Lord. She knew she couldn't remain in God's presence. She needed a mediator, someone who could stand before the Holy One and not die, someone who could represent her, receive God's Word on her behalf and communicate God's Word on his behalf. God granted her request. Verse 30, "Go and say to them, 'Return to your tents.' But you (Moses), stand here by me, and I will tell you the whole commandment and the statutes and the rules that you shall teach them, that they may do them in the land that I am giving them to possess."

Moses functioned as Israel's mediator. He came close while she stood afar. He remained in God's dwelling place while she left for her own. He did for Israel what she could not do for herself. Friends, our spiritual need has not changed because our God has not changed. We too need a mediator and God has graciously provided the mediator we need, only he is immeasurably better than Moses!

Hebrews 3:1–6, "Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him...Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope."

What makes Jesus, the Son of God, a better mediator, a better priest, than Moses? He gives us life not by entering the Father's house on our behalf, but by bringing us into the Father's house! Indeed, by filling us with the Spirit, he makes us the Father's house!

Hebrews 7:22–25, "This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them."

The fear of the Lord compelled her to stand far off, to return to her dwelling place instead of remaining in God's dwelling place. Friends, the gospel of Jesus Christ completely reverses that dynamic. Where once the fear of the Lord compelled God's people to stand afar, now the fear of the Lord compels us to draw near!

Why? Why would anyone attempt to stand before a consuming fire? Psalms 130:3, "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" I couldn't stand. You couldn't stand. Even Moses couldn't continue to stand. Psalms 130:4, "But with you

there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.” It’s the forgiveness of sins Jesus won for us at the cross that enables us to draw near with trembling joy fueled by the fear of the Lord.

In the words of Charles Spurgeon, “When a man really receives the pardon for all his sins, he is the man who fears the Lord. This is clearly the case, for pardon breeds love in the soul; and the more a man is forgiven, the more he loves. Where great sin has been blotted out, there comes to be great love. Well, is not love the very core of the true fear of God?”

When our hearts are captivated with joy and delight, whenever we stand in awe of someone or something, what do we instinctively do? We draw near. What do fiancés do when their heart is awestruck by the beauty of their bride-to-be? They draw near. What do mountaineers do when their heart is awestruck by the beauty of a summit? They draw near. What do Eagles fans do when their heart is awestruck by the athletic prowess of Jalen Hurts? They draw near. What do toddlers do when their heart is captivated by the pleasures of a cookie jar? They draw near.

All those pleasures pale in comparison to the joy of drawing near to God. And the experience waiting for us as we draw near through faith in Jesus, our perfect mediator, our perfect priest, is immeasurably more glorious than what Israel witnessed at Sinai.

Hebrew 12:18–24, “For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them... But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

On every level, Jesus is better. Moses taught Israel the Word of God. Jesus is the Word of God. Moses stood temporarily on Mt. Sinai. Jesus is permanently seated at the Father’s right hand. Moses merely exhorted Israel to do God’s commands. Jesus empowers us to do God’s commands. The Old Covenant says, “Return to your tents.” The New Covenant says, “Let us therefore draw near to the throne of grace with confidence.” The fear of the Lord compels us to draw near with trembling joy.

3) THE BLESSING OF GOD RESTS ON THOSE WHO KEEP HIS COMMANDS (5:32-6:3)

The fear of the Lord isn't just right or necessary. It is the path of life, joy, peace, and every good thing. Why? Because it motivates us to keep God's commands and God's blessing is reserved for those who keep his commands. Look back at verse 29. What does the fear of the Lord produce? How is the fear of the Lord expressed? "Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!"

The fear of the Lord is expressed through obedience to God's commands and obedience to God's commands is what identifies someone as a man or woman who fears the Lord. For when we take the Lord seriously, we will take his Word seriously. We'll believe what he says. We'll trust what he says. And we'll do what he says. And we will count walking in the path of his commands a tremendous privilege because we know his Word is a reflection, a revelation, of his abundant goodness and steadfast love.

If you fear the Lord, you won't say, "Do I have to obey this command? This is ridiculous." Instead, you'll say, "It is the greatest honor of my life to live in a way that magnifies the worth and beauty of Jesus." Why? Because you fear the Lord. You're convinced no one is more glorious or worthy of praise than him and you long to make much of him through the way you live.

Look at verse 33 because verse 33 captures the heart of what Moses repeatedly says in 5:32-6:3. "You shall walk in all the way that the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you shall possess." Observe several critical things.

First, the words of Scripture are not what your Christian friend says, or what the church says, or what your parents say. They are what "The LORD your God has commanded you." When you hear God's Word, you're not dealing with them. You're dealing with Him. When we obey or disobey God's Word, we're not just keeping or violating a random rule. We are delighting in or disowning him. It's personal.

Second, notice the divine intent of an obedience fueled by the fear of the Lord. God isn't trying to keep you under this thumb in an oppressive way. He is seeking your good! He is speaking to you because he is that eager to bless you! "Walk in all the way that the LORD your God has commanded you..." Why? So that you may "Live." That doesn't mean God's blessing, the smile of his favor, is something we earn through our obedience.

Rather, in the words of Christopher Wright, it is “Appropriated and enjoyed” through obedience.

God doesn’t want you to die. He wants you to live! And not just live in an at-least-your-breathing-so-be-grateful kind of way. No. He wants it to “Go well” with you. His commands mark out more than the path of life. They mark out the good life! And not just the good life for a little while, but forever. “That you may live long in the land,” Moses says. Or as the Lord himself declares in verse 29, “That it may go well with them and with their descendants forever!” Our children and grandchildren experience God’s blessing when we choose to obey his commands in the fear of the Lord.

I’ve heard people say, “I know what I’m doing is wrong, but God will forgive me and everything will work out in the end.” Friend, that is the exact opposite of what the Lord promises in Deuteronomy 6:3. If you want it “Go well” with you. If you want to “Multiply greatly,” if you want to experience the fulfillment of God’s promises. If you want to live in a land “Flowing with milk and honey,” overflowing with joy and life and blessing. Then there is one thing you must do. You must be careful to “Hear” God’s Word and “Do” God’s Word.

Twice in the final section of this passage, Moses says to Israel, “Be careful.” Be careful. Why? Because our hearts are prone to wander. We so quickly stand in awe of lesser glories and paltry pleasures. When God holds out the eternal joy of knowing and following him. Remember, the blessing of God rests on those who keep his commands.

CONCLUSION

If you are presently struggling to do something God has told you to do, the answer is not to try harder. The answer is to grow in the fear of the Lord, to meditate on God’s Word until your soul is gripped by a vision of his glory. For when you are gripped by a vision of the glory of God, you will be careful to obey his Word.

That means if you are going to be a Christian, you must be a reader and a listener, not merely a watcher. It will not do to say, “Pastor, I would rather watch a movie than read the Bible. Or I would rather browse videos on YouTube than listen to the sermon I missed because I served in King’sKids last week or was on the security team last Sunday.

Brothers and sisters, God didn’t give us a movie. He gave us a book. And he did that knowing some of us naturally like books more than others. His grace is sufficient. His power is made perfect in weakness. If you want your affections for God to grow. If you want to experience the trembling joy of growing in the fear of the Lord, you must take

up and read. Hit play and listen. Not because reading Scripture is a magic formula, but because it is our God-given window to the radiance of his glory.

If you do, and you do not feel what Israel felt at Sinai, it's not because there is a fault with the text. It's because we need the Spirit to give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and a heart to understand. Otherwise, the Word will remain mere letters on a page. Fervently pray with the psalmists, "Lord, give me an open ear. "Open my eyes, open my heart and open my mind to perceive wonderful things in your law."

And if you struggle to make sense of God's Word or see anything glorious in it, ask for help from an older Christian. Ask them to show you how they read. How they meditate. What they see. By the grace of God, it's a skill we can help one another to develop. Many people read Scripture looking for a list of things to do or not do. God wants us to read his Word, first and foremost, because we long to see and know him.

The Word of God produces the fear of God by revealing the glory of God. The fear of God compels us to draw near to God through faith in the Son, doing all he has commanded us. Then and only then will we experience his blessing. So fear the Lord, brothers and sisters. Draw near through the Son. Keep his commands. Trust in his blessing. May we be a people who live in awe of him.