



The Fear of the Lord

Psalm 111-112, Isaiah 6:1-10

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Well, good to see all of you here. Thank you for joining us. Those of you online, those of you here in the room, worship is more fun when you're here, so thank you.

There's a singer named Shaboozi, which is kind of an interesting name. And he has a song called *Good News*, and he starts talking about what a difficult year it's been. *Keep on bluffing, but I just can't win. Drowned my sorrows, but they learned to swim.* That's a really great line. Like I am a sucker for a great line. *Drowned my sorrows, but they learned to swim. I need some good news. Sitting here sipping on cold truth. Nobody knows what I'm going through. Bet the devil wouldn't walk in my shoes. Wish someone told me that living this life can be lonely. Trying to get away from the old me. Still stuck singing these blues. All I really need is a little good news.*

Don't we all? Because there's plenty of bad news, isn't there? Someone said to me this week, hey, you're a Mariners fan. Good news, we're headed to the playoff. And I was like, we've been here before. Only to lose it in the end, I refuse to hope. Only I do hope a little bit. Where's it hard for you to hope right now? Where do you need some good news?

That's part of why we're doing this sermon series called *Unleashed*, about how Jesus unleashes us from the things that hold us back—from the courage, the joy, the meaning, the adventure, the purpose, that bigger life that he wants to give us. Unleashes us from worry about things in our own life or what we keep seeing in the news. Unleashes us from the sense that we were made for more, but we're stuck in a rut, wanting more adventure and purpose. Unleashes us from the ways that our health, relationship, school or career problems can get us down and hold us back. Unleashes us from those things and unleashes us for what he called abundant living. And that's really good news.

And one of the things we need in order to be unleashed is to reclaim something that we don't talk too much about anymore in this church and a lot of other churches, and that is the fear of the Lord. That phrase, the fear of the Lord, shows up over 150 times in the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testament. It's a major theme, but preachers shy away from it. I have never preached an entire sermon on the fear of the Lord until today. So get afraid.

Now, there's some good reasons for that. Fear of the Lord has been used to portray an angry, vengeful God who's just out to get us. It's associated with street preachers yelling at people that they're going to go to hell. But misuse does not cancel legitimate use. Now, it is absolutely true that God loves us. Absolutely true, but I think we sometimes distort what that means. We turn God into a cuddly teddy bear—someone who is there to make me feel better and help me achieve my life plans. We tame him. We make him smaller than he actually is. A God we can understand and control who only tells us what we want to hear and never challenges us.

But that God, that kind of God, is far too frail, feeble and flimsy to unleash anybody from anything. There are more galaxies in the universe than there are grains of sand on earth. Each of those galaxies contains billions, sometimes trillions of stars. God made all of that. He is completely holy, perfect. His love for you burns with the intensity of a billion suns. He split the Red Sea in two, he cracked open the grave and he conquered death. That's not the sort of being you invite into your life as your personal assistant. To be unleashed, our God has to get bigger.

Often you'll hear preachers say, oh, the fear of the Lord, that doesn't mean we're actually afraid of God. It means reverence and awe, but not actually afraid of God. Eh, ish, not kind of, but sort of. In the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, the word that's used there means something between respect and sheer terror. There is an element of actually being afraid of God in this.

Some of you have heard me say, it's like standing at the base of Hoover Dam, right? You can feel the buzz of the turbines, you hear the electricity crackle, and you know that if it were to give way, you would be pulverized by tons of water. It's kind of scary. But you also know that that dam is for you. It prevents flooding, it creates electricity. Only a really big God that's a little bit scary can set us free.

In the Bible, in Psalm 111, which is about how big God is, it says, *Great are the works of the Lord, glorious and majestic are his deeds*. That's how the Psalm begins. Then the Psalm ends saying this: *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. All who follow his commands have a good understanding*. That's how Psalm 111 ends. Then the next Psalm, 112, very first verse: *Blessed are those who fear the Lord, who find great delights in his commands*. In other words, they mirror each other. Psalm 111 and 112 end and begin the same way, and they both repeat the phrase “fear of the Lord,” and link it to following God's commands.

And then Psalm 112 goes on to describe the kind of life that people who fear the Lord live. So, people who fear the Lord—verse two, *their children will be mighty in the land. The generation of the upright will be blessed.* In other words, they're relationally strong. Thriving families, thriving friendships. *Even in darkness, light dawns for the upright.* People who fear God can handle suffering. No matter how bad things get, there's light in the darkness.

Because, see, a small view of God can't handle suffering. Because if we believe the only point in life is to be happy, and my personal assistant God, his job is to make me happy, then suffering becomes intolerable. Because it's robbing me of the purpose of my life, which is to be happy. But if we believe in a big God, and believe the point of life is to be in relationship with that God, and become like Jesus, we're not gonna like suffering. Nobody does, but we can handle it. Because it doesn't rob us of the purpose of life. Because we can love God and become like Jesus, suffering or not.

Verse 5, *Good will come to those who conduct their affairs with justice.* People who fear God live justly, and they heal injustice. Verse 6, *Surely the righteous will be remembered forever.* They have a great reputation. They're known for integrity. People trust them. Verse 7, *They will have no fear of bad news. Their hearts are secure. They will have no fear.* Twice it says they'll have no fear. Remember, the Psalm began saying, *Blessed are those who fear the Lord.* So people who fear the Lord have no fear. That's a paradox. And I'll get to that in a minute.

Verse 9, *They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor.* That is, they're generous, which also means they are not anxious about money. They trust God to provide. So let's put all that together. People who fear the Lord have thriving relationships, rise above suffering, heal injustice, making this world a better place. They have great reputations. They're trusted by everybody. They're free from fear and are generous and not anxious about money. That sounds like an unleashed life to me. That sounds like an unleashed life to me.

And it begins with the fear of the Lord for a couple of reasons. First, when we fear the Lord, we are unleashed from the self-imposed leashes. Because let's be honest, a lot of the things that leash us, that hold us back, we choose them. They're self-imposed, right? We choose our over-busy schedules. We choose to hang on to bitterness and not forgive. Psalm 112 says, *Blessed are those who fear the Lord, who find great delights in his commands.*

Psalm 111 says, *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.* And in the original Hebrew, the word for wisdom is not knowledge. It means practical living that works. So people who fear the Lord live in a way that just works because they follow God's commands. When we have a healthy awe and respect for God, we follow his commands, not because we're afraid he's gonna blast us if we don't, but because his commands lead to a flourishing life and disobeying them hurts us. But when we obey them, that leads to an unleashed, flourishing life.

Now, let me define that. It doesn't necessarily mean we'll be wealthy and healthy and all that prosperity gospel stuff.

No, it means fulfilled, great relationships, adventure, meaning and purpose. And this is where our small personal gods of our culture, they're not adequate to unleash us, because that god only tells us what we want to hear and supports every decision we make, even if it hurts us or other people.

A while back, I read about a guy who had to be rushed to the hospital because he put a rattlesnake in his mouth to impress his friends with how brave he was. And when he recovered, he was telling a reporter about it, and he said, yeah, mostly it was my own stupid fault. Mostly? How about like a hundred percent your own stupid fault? Like a little fear of consequences would have helped him out, don't you think?

Now, you're thinking, I'd never be that stupid, wouldn't you? Because I do some pretty stupid things that hurt other people, hurt myself. Here's the thing: God created you and me, and he created the world, and he knows how all of that works. And when we violate his commands, we are going against the grain of the universe and against the grain of our own nature, and it never ends well.

Right now, there's this kind of mini revival going on in the UK, where people in their 20s are starting to come to church. Often, they haven't even been invited by anyone—they just start showing up at church. And one of the themes that's emerging is that all the narratives of our culture aren't working for them. Success is elusive and unsatisfying when you get it. Money—hard to get, hard to hang on to. Chasing reputation just leads to anxiety and worry about what other people are thinking about us, and the narratives of sexual liberation have really let them down. United bodies, but not souls. Physical pleasure, but not the intimacy, love, and acceptance that they're craving. Leashes everywhere.

And so Jesus' commands are actually starting to look pretty good to them, because Jesus' commands free us from all our self-imposed leashes. See, God's love is not a pampering love, it's a perfecting love. God's love is not a pampering love, it's a perfecting love that frees us from the leashes we put on ourselves.

Second point, people who fear God are unleashed from fear. That's that paradox. Fear God? You're unleashed from fear. Psalm 112 says, *Blessed are those who fear the Lord*. Then a little later, verse 8, *They will have no fear of bad news*. Is there bad news right now? Wouldn't it be nice to be unafraid in the face of that? *Their hearts are secure, they will have no fear*. See, the paradox is, the more we fear God, the less we fear everything else. Because we know we have a very big God. And if we're with him, we're safe.

In the Book of Isaiah, the prophet has a vision. And he says this: *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord high and exalted, seated on a throne, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings, and they were calling to one another: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his*

glory. At the sound of their voices, the doorposts and the threshold shook, and the temple was filled with smoke.

This is not your small personal assistant God. This is a very big God. And Isaiah's response is fear. *Woe to me, I am ruined.* And you'd be afraid too—beasts with six wings, smoke, earthquakes. But the most important line is the first line: *In the year King Uzziah died.* Uzziah had been king for 52 years. To put that in perspective, that'd be as if Richard Nixon was still president. Most people didn't remember any other king. And during his reign, Israel became prosperous and affluent and militarily strong, which led to people becoming smug, pleasure-seeking, looking out only for their own interests rather than loving God and their neighbor. And as a result, the culture became less cohesive and more divided.

Is this sounding familiar? And then the nation of Assyria started conquering everybody and was headed toward Israel. It's a crisis. And that's when Uzziah, this trusted, long-time king, died. In the year King Uzziah died—a very, very scary year—I saw the Lord high and lifted up, surrounded by heavenly be... Oh, never mind. Never mind. We're gonna be okay. Because something bigger than Uzziah is here. Something bigger than Assyria is here. Something bigger than Israel is here. Something bigger than Democrats is here. Something bigger than Republicans is here. Something bigger than the United States or any other nation is here. And he outlasts all those other things. He is eternal. And if we are with him, we are with something that will never fail, falter or be taken away.

Whom then shall I fear? Whom then shall I fear? Fear. That's saying amen, yeah God, because we don't have to fear. Fear of the Lord unleashes us from our small saviors who can't save us anyway. Fear of the Lord unleashes us from our small saviors who can't save us anyway. We look to a political figure or a political movement or our jobs or a relationship or money to feel secure. And they're good things, but they're not eternal things. And they're gonna let us down.

Fear of the Lord, because you see how big he is, leads to fearing nothing at all. Fear of the Lord frees us from our self-imposed leashes, unleashes us from fear, and then finally, fear of the Lord unleashes us from the burden of self for a life of meaning, purpose and joy.

I don't know about you, but do you ever get weary of the burden of self? Like, how am I doing today? Is Scott happy today? What does Scott want today? Oh, who cares about Scott, right? But the fear of the Lord makes us humble, and humility isn't thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less. It's decentering ourselves. Because when we see how big God is, we realize he is God, I am not. He is big, I am not. He is perfect, I am not. He is the center, I am not. It makes us humble.

Back in the 1940s, there was a British member of parliament who constantly opposed the Prime Minister Winston Churchill. And a reporter asked Churchill what he thought about this man, and Churchill said, "He's a humble man, and he has much to be humble

about." We have much to be humble about. And when we are humble, we don't judge other people because you know what? I know I'm a sinner. Nobody's better, nobody's worse. We're all sinners in need of God's grace. We don't see one group as better than another. When we're humble, we don't demean others. When we're humble, we don't use dehumanizing language about people of another race or another country or on the opposite side of us politically. I'm not sure Christians are coming off as humble these days in our country. It's because we lack a proper fear of the Lord. True fear of the Lord leaves you humble. And humble is just another word for gloriously unleashed from the burden of self.

After Isaiah sees God in heaven on his throne, he says, *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send and who will go for us? And I said, Here am I, send me. He said, Go and tell this people, Be ever hearing but never understanding. Be ever seeing but never perceiving.*

And that last bit is kind of weird, right? What? Basically, God is saying this to Isaiah: I'm calling you to preach to people who will never listen, they'll never change, you'll have absolutely no success at all. And Isaiah says, well, even if there's no success, it'll still be an adventure, it'll still get me closer to you, God. You'll do miracles, I'll get to see them, and I get to do all of that with you. So even if I don't succeed, even if I'm deemed a failure, here am I, send me.

What can unleash us from all the stress that comes from trying to win people's approval? What can unleash us from our school or career or money worries? Unleash us from our frantic effort to get what we want, which often just makes us stressed and miserable? What can unleash us from this leash called self? Only a very big God that captures your full heart, mind and soul, such that you don't care what other people think about you, you don't care if you're rich or poor, you don't care if you win or lose, you only care to experience the presence of the infinite, almighty, all-powerful, all-holy God. That's what the fear of the Lord can do for us.

So it's time to bring back the fear of the Lord. So then how do we do that? How do we do that? Well, in order to have the freedom Isaiah had, we need to see what Isaiah saw. Only the Holy Spirit can unleash us. And so action steps for this week, similar to the last two weeks: first, position yourself to experience the Holy Spirit in worship.

Okay, just like in football—I got this one from Anthony, by the way—just like in football, where the receiver has to be in a position to get the ball, we have to put ourselves in a position to experience the Holy Spirit. And one of the best places is worship. Just this week, I heard a man who's a lawyer talk about how, you know, he was a Christian, but he never told anyone he was a Christian because he was terrified what they'd think of him, especially in his law firm, which was very hostile to Christianity. Well then, one Sunday in worship, he suddenly felt the Holy Spirit just right there, really present, and gave him a sense of how big and powerful and holy God is. And he felt this mixture of awe and reverence and fear. And it was so intense that he couldn't even speak for about

15 minutes after worship, which he said was a miracle because he's a lawyer and he can always talk.

And then the next morning when he went to work, he just started telling everybody about his faith, no longer afraid of what they would think of him. Fear of the Lord drove out fear of everything else. So open yourself up in worship. Let the music move you. Pay attention to the words of the song. The Holy Spirit is in this room right now, right here. Talk to him.

And then second action step, second action step, pay attention to the ways you shrink God this week. Maybe it's giving into fear. As if God isn't big enough to handle whatever you face. Maybe it's to minimize some sin. Ah, it's no big deal and God's saying actually it is a big deal. Or maybe it's to overlook something that God has done.

Earlier this year, I told you about some problems with my eyes. Suddenly my vision was really blurry and for months, you know, it went on for months. The doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong. Well, now it's better. My vision is back to what it should be. And people have asked me about it. And I said, oh, it's better. We don't know what caused it and don't know why it went away. And some of you have called me on that and said, really? Like, do you think maybe a church full of people praying for you might have had something to do with it? Nah, can't be that. See what I did there? I shrank God. Notice when you do that and ask God to expand your vision of him because only a very big God can set us free.

Some of you may have heard me tell this story that my dad used to tell about when he was a kid, and his dad had abandoned the family. They were homeless. They had to squat in abandoned houses. There were days they didn't have food, so my dad grew up with a lot of fear and insecurity. And at one of the houses they were squatting at, there was a bird's nest with baby birds in it, and my dad and his siblings loved the birds because it was the closest thing to pets they were ever going to have. Well, one day they saw this giant rattlesnake slithering toward the baby birds, and my dad and his siblings started to scream. So my grandmother, who was a very loving but simultaneously terrifying woman, grabbed an ax, walked over there like a lumberjack, and just started hacking at that snake. Because her kids loved the birds, and she loved her kids, and she knew it was either the snake or the birds, and next it might have been her kids. So she just hacked away at that snake, and bits of snake were flying everywhere, and the mother bird was chirping, and the baby birds were chirping, and my dad and his siblings were chirping. Like that snake did not stand a chance against grandma. Most things didn't. And my dad said it was terrifying and comforting at the same time. Because in the chaos and fear that was his life at that point, he knew he had this Amazon woman for a mother, and she loved him, and her love was strong and a little bit scary, and would do battle with anything that threatened him.

That's what the fear of the Lord is like. His love spun galaxies into existence, made deaf people hear, made blind people see, made lame people walk, and all of that powerful love is focused on you. So fear the Lord, and fear no more.

And as we've been saying, one of the places that we experience this, where we can see how big God is, like that lawyer I told you about, where the Holy Spirit can unleash us, one of the places that happens is in worship. The Holy Spirit sets us free in worship. So we're gonna continue in worship right now. And the Holy Spirit is here. He is in this room. And we're gonna take just a few moments of silent prayer. And in that silent prayer, ask this, ask, Holy Spirit, what do you want to unleash me from? And what do you want to unleash me for? So Holy Spirit, you are welcome here. And in these moments of silence, show us, what do you want to unleash me from? What do you want to unleash me for? Help us to see how big you are, how holy you are. Instill in us a holy awe, a holy reverence, a holy fear, for all your power and all your might. Help us see who you really are, so that we know for sure, you unleash us from and you unleash us for. So Lord, what is that? What do you want to unleash us from? What do you unleash us for? Because only you are big enough, only you are holy enough, only you are powerful enough to set us free.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What connections do you see between Psalm 111 and 112? How does 112 mirror 111, and taken together what is the main point (or points) they are making?
- Has the phrase "fear of the Lord" been misused in your life or in the life of someone you know? How can that concept be something positive and helpful in our faith?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

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Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.