

The unfolding of your words gives light.

Conquering Fear

Deuteronomy 1

The nation of Israel was poised to enter the Promised Land. An entire generation had died in the wilderness. All that remained were Moses, Caleb, Joshua and a few million people under 60 years of age. Had you asked one of these young people how they had experienced the power of God, few could have recounted details of the exodus from memory. Any one of them, however, could have told you how the living God defeated Sihon the king of the Amorites and Og the king of Bashan just east of the Jordan.

The book of Deuteronomy is a "second law." Moses gave these instructions just after the defeat of Sihon and Og and just before he died. Like the four Gospels, it retells stories the people already knew. Like Paul's second letter to Timothy, it is the swansong of a great leader. Like the cry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, it is the voice of God's prophet standing by a river calling his followers to repent.

This chapter is largely Moses' reminder of what happened the last time the nation made preparations to enter and possess what God had promised. Having left Sinai protected by the presence of God, the earlier generation had failed miserably and a thirty-eighth year judgment ensued.

Where is the new generation vulnerable? How can they keep from falling into the same error that made their fathers fall in the wilderness? Read the warnings of Moses in this chapter and you will see. Right away he took the people on a review of the ill-fated trip to the edge of the Promised Land nearly 40 years earlier. What had been the biggest issue in the hearts of the nation on that day? Fear. Notice the counsel Moses gave the leaders on that day (1:17): "You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike. **You shall not fear man, for the judgment is God's.** The case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it."

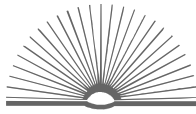
Moses had gone on to encourage the earlier generation of leaders by saying (1:21): "See, the Lord your God has placed the land before you; go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has spoken to you. **Do not fear or be dismayed.**"

The earlier generation, however, had acted on their fear in a number of ways.

- They asked the wrong questions (1:22). They asked "Should we go up and take the land?" They should have asked, "Which way should we take when we go up?"
- They doubted God's love like self-centered adolescents: "God hates us!" (1:27).
- They suggested that God was out to get them. They forgot about his presence made possible by the bloody tabernacle system (1:30-33).
- They even raised smokescreen issues, pretending their reluctance sprung from concern for their children (1:39).

This new generation was not without their failures, but they did eventually follow God into the Promised Land.

The kind of fear exhibited by Israel in the wilderness is the same as the fear in your experience. You fear the unknown. You fear personal harm. Mostly you fear the opinions of men. The Lord Jesus said of the Pharisees, "they do all their deeds to be noticed by men." Even Peter, a rock among the apostles, feared the inquisition of a little girl when Jesus was being tried and feared the opinions of Judaizers when he had to choose between them and Gentile believers.



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How do you know if fear—particularly the fear of man—is a sin in your life? Give yourself a quiz.

1. Are you deeply affected by what people say about you? Do you play their words over and over in your mind after you hear them?
2. Are you afraid of being rejected so much that you are willing to act fake or even lie to stay in favor with people?
3. Are you part of a clique?
4. Do you secretly wish you were part of the clique you criticize?
5. Have you adopted a worldly definition of success?
6. Do you hate to be honored in public because you do not like people looking at you?
7. Does it hurt your feelings when you are not honored in public?
8. Do you prefer seclusion?
9. Do you prefer being in the limelight?

You can see that the fear man takes on many faces. Unbelieving psychology has called the fear man "co-dependency" or "low self-esteem." The biblical truth behind these worldly observations is this: our problem is not that we think too lowly of ourselves but that we think too highly of ourselves. Israel in the wilderness had a fear problem because it had a pride problem. The reason we fear man more than we fear God is because we are by nature self-loving and self-preserving people. Ed Welch, author of *When People Are Big and God Is Small*, said "Low self-esteem is just pride thwarted."

So what happened? Why do we have Moses giving a pep talk to leaders still standing on the outside of the land nearly 40 years later? Fear. They asked the wrong questions—questions you and I ought to be evaluating lest we fall prey to the same fears. Consider the God-esteeming questions you ought to ask when facing new obstacles:

1. Do not ask, "Should I obey?" Ask, "Which path of obedience should I take?" We look at obedience to the commands of God as restrictive when we should look at it as freeing. The fish in the aquarium is only restricted because the environment outside the restriction is deadly. Where is the real freedom to be found?
2. Do not ask, "How big is my obstacle?" Ask, "How big is my God?" You do not face hard times outside of a well-planned design. Murderous giants, despotic leaders and fiery furnaces are put in your way to show the power of God.
3. Do not ask, "Does God care for me?" Ask, "How much does he care for me?" Meditate on the care God has given his people, particularly the violent death he used to bring his people into his presence (well-pictured in the tabernacle system). He who did not spare his own Son will graciously give his people all they need when they need it.

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A message by Steven L. Svendsen, Sr.
Rice Lake Baptist Church