

The Joy of Fearing God

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[0 : 0 0] If you will, go with me to Acts chapter 17. Acts chapter 17. I mentioned this passage a few weeks ago as we discussed God's lordship and our submission to his authority, but I'd like to go here again because it serves as a nice foundational text for our subject today.

In Acts 17, Paul is traveling from place to place, preaching the gospel. He goes to Thessalonica, then he goes to Berea, and finally we see him arrive in Athens, Greece.

And I'll begin reading at verse 22. Acts 17, 22. So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are religious.

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, to the unknown God. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind, life and breath and everything.

[1 : 2 3] And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, for we are indeed his offspring.

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed the day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

Now this is a very insightful example of evangelism. Wisely, Paul doesn't go straight to the Old Testament here, as he did when he was speaking to Jewish audiences.

[2 : 3 5] He doesn't rush to proclaim Jesus the Messiah, the resurrected Christ. Obviously that's where his message will inevitably lead him, and that's where it must lead him, if he is to be a faithful ambassador for Christ.

As he did elsewhere, I did not, as he said elsewhere, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom, for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Paul preached the gospel. He always preached the gospel. But he was wise enough to realize that he may need to tweak his delivery for certain audiences, adjust exactly how he would present that message.

If nothing else, he may need to choose a different starting point, which he does here. Here, Paul doesn't begin with the life and death of Christ. He doesn't even begin with Old Testament prophecies that pointed people to Christ.

Why? Why? He's speaking to pagan Gentiles. He's not speaking to Jews. These men don't know the Old Testament. These men aren't necessarily waiting for a Savior as the Jews were.

[3 : 47] In fact, as they listen to Paul, they're probably wondering what this Jewish preacher could possibly offer them. Who is this man? So Paul recognizes he needs to take a different approach.

And he instantly picks up on the fact that these men are very religious. If I remember correctly, the old King James Version calls them superstitious. There's certainly some truth to that, as evidenced by the fact that they built an altar and inscribed these words to the unknown God.

Was that a reference to Yahweh, the God of our Bibles, the God of Israel? No. No. But they were afraid of leaving some God out of all the altars that they built, of all of the religious artifacts and things they did to appease these various gods just in case they left any of these gods out.

They built this altar as a final catch-all altar that they hoped would satisfy any God that perhaps they missed with some of the others. And Paul uses this as a prop when he begins to speak with them.

It's an illustration. He's entering their world, so he may as well use their culture to make his points. It'll resonate that way. Even so, you'll notice he doesn't really spend the first ten minutes trying to become their buddy here.

[5 : 18] We don't see that. Instead, he begins with this bold, unapologetic rebuke of their entire religious system. It may be subtle to us, but he says, the God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands.

In a place like Athens, that's bold. By declaring what he does about God here, he is denying every God the Greeks worshipped.

At the same time, though, Paul doesn't just beat them down point by point. It's not a sermon full of nothing but rebukes. Notice what he says next, verse 26, and he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth.

Obviously, Paul's primary point is to teach them something about God, but he's also doing something else that's quite useful in evangelism. If you want to make a mental note of this, in a sense, he's uniting himself with the Greeks here.

Do you see that? While they must have seen him as a complete foreigner, he's literally from another country, but he's also Jewish, and that creates a pretty big gap between them, they must have seen him as an outsider, an extreme outsider, but he's bringing everyone together here.

[6 : 50] For all of their differences, they share one substantial common bond, and that is their humanity, their blood. Through Adam, God made every nation of mankind.

The Gentiles, the Jews, all of us. In effect, Paul says, you know, we're not that different. You boil it all down, we're not that different. As I said, it's an insightful example of evangelism.

On the one hand, Paul doesn't hesitate to contradict their worldview. If he's going to preach the gospel, he must contradict their worldview. On the other hand, we see him trying to bridge gaps at the same time.

I think he said it best in 1 Corinthians 9 when he said to the Jews, I became a Jew in order to win the Jews. To the weak, I became weak. To those outside of law, I stood outside of the law.

That I might win all. I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. And I do it all for the sake of the gospel. That's what he's doing here.

[8 : 00] In fact, Paul goes even further in making a connection with these Greek men. He quotes not one, but two of their poets. That's verse 28.

Again, he doesn't cite the Old Testament here. Not that we necessarily have the full sermon. But he doesn't appear to cite the Old Testament. He uses their own culture to illustrate his point.

And what better way to get their attention? Oh, this guy knows our literature. And here I thought he was just some other, some random religious Jew. It's very clever on Paul's part.

It's very effective. The point he wants to make about Yahweh, the true God, is something their people recognized hundreds of years before.

It's as if to say, look, I'm not really telling you anything new. What I'm telling you about God is something that is practically intuitive. Your forefathers knew this centuries ago.

[9 : 05] More to the point, what does Paul say here about God? What's his message? First, God is the creator of all things. Verse 24, God made the world and everything in it.

Second, God is the sustainer of all things. Verse 25, He Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

And third, God is sovereign over all things. Verse 26, He made from one nation of mankind, He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.

Of course, if God is the sovereign creator and sustainer of all things, it stands to reason that we, His creations, would depend on Him, that we would seek Him, that we would obey Him, which is the point Paul comes to in verse 30, the times of ignorance, God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent.

Then, of course, Paul proceeds to talk about Christ. For our purposes, though, we want to focus on what he says about God. God is the sovereign creator and sustainer of all things.

[10 : 37] Now, in this Sunday school series, we've been studying godly fear. We began by defining what it means to fear God.

Then we considered some of God's attributes, which should lead us to fear Him. The more we know about God, the more we're inclined to fear Him. Then we started to look at some of the more practical things we can do to grow in our fear of God.

And in case it needs to be said again, godly fear is a very good thing. A very good thing. It's a necessary thing. It's a thing that comes with tremendous joys and blessings, which we will try to make as clear as possible before this series is over.

Now, last week, Roger explained that to fear God is to live in the conscious awareness of His presence. It made me think of a line by the Puritan Thomas Brooks.

He said, though heaven be God's palace, it is not His prison. It's His palace, not His prison. In case anyone is tempted to think that God is way up there, far removed from life down here.

[11 : 49] No, that's not the case at all. When a heathen philosopher once asked one of the Puritans, where is God? That man replied, where is He not?

But we're talking about practical steps we can take to grow in godly fear. So I'll stress that we are to live in conscious awareness of God's presence.

Yes, God is everywhere, but we need to recognize that. We need to remember that. We need to deliberately think about that day after day, moment by moment, which has a way of changing everything.

It's one thing to think of God as this distant deity way up there somewhere. It's quite another to know He is here.

To know that He is always with us. To know that He sees all. He knows all, including every fear and every concern in our hearts and minds.

[12 : 54] That realization changes everything, doesn't it? Now, building upon that thought, we want to consider another characteristic of someone who fears God.

A God-fearing person will not only live in deliberate awareness of God's presence, but he or she will also live in deliberate dependence on God.

That's what we're talking about today. Depending on God. Again, I use the word deliberate for a reason. We depend on God whether we want to or not.

Whether we recognize it or not. The goal here is to be intentionally dependent on Him. For what exactly? Everything.

Absolutely everything. For all of life. For every moment. For every breath. Isn't that what we learn here from Paul in Acts 17? God is Lord of heaven and earth.

[13 : 59] Verse 24. He gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. Verse 25. He has determined allotted periods and the boundaries of our dwelling place.

Verse 26. He is actually not far from each one of us as we heard last week. That's verse 27. It is in Him we live and move and have our being.

Verse 28. By the way, let me make a brief comment about that last quote because I don't remember the details of the discussion but I remember talking with a fellow Christian some time ago and I cited verse 28 and he told me that I should be careful about using that verse as some sort of proof text because it comes from a song that was written in devotion to Zeus.

And I understand his point but let me briefly make a counter argument in case you ever come across this or have thought about it yourself. First of all, the statement that Paul makes is true about God.

It is true about God whether it was originally written about God or not which is why Paul uses it. And second, when we cite this verse, we're not really citing a Greek poem.

[15 : 15] We're citing the words of the Apostle Paul in the pages of divinely inspired Scripture. I don't know whether or not anyone has ever felt any uneasiness with a verse like this but in case you have, I just thought I would throw that out there and address it.

Regardless, it is true that it is in God we live and move and have our being. He is the sovereign creator. The sovereign sustainer.

Apart from Him we have nothing. Apart from Him we don't exist. Whether we acknowledge it or not we depend on Him for everything.

The difference between the God-fearing believer and the unbeliever who doesn't fear God is this deliberate dependence. The former strives to depend on God the latter doesn't though he or she still depends on God.

He or she just doesn't acknowledge it. Doesn't realize it. In his commentary on the book of Romans John Murray writes The fear of God means that God is constantly in the center of our thought and apprehension and life is characterized by the all-persuasive consciousness of dependence upon Him and responsibility to Him.

[16 : 46] Jerry Bridges adds this attitude of absolute dependence on God is not one to be temporarily assumed as in a time of crisis but is to be sustained through all the routine activities of life both spiritual and temporal.

And I think that's an excellent point because I think we all have a tendency to rely on God when things get challenging. We turn to Him in those moments. Working in funeral service I've seen many non-Christians plead with God during times of crisis.

They're willing to turn to Him they're willing to depend on Him when they don't know what else to do but as soon as life starts going smoothly again the prayers stop.

That sense of dependency evaporates they quickly lose sight of their dependency on Him. It is in Him we live and move and have our being. This is just as true when life is going great as when everything is going wrong.

so we need to cultivate a spirit of utter complete dependence on God at all times for everything.

[18 : 05] For starters we need to depend on God for life itself. For life itself. In Him we live. Verse 25 God Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

I've said before that God doesn't have to take a life. All He has to do is stop giving it. Again He is our sovereign sustainer.

My times are in your hand David says in Psalm 31. When Daniel rebuked the king for his pride he said you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven the God in whose hand is your breath and whose are all your ways you have not honored.

Proverbs 27.1 says do not boast about tomorrow for you do not know what a day may bring. Take a moment sometime to just close your eyes and focus on your breathing.

every breath every inhale every exhale one after the other a gift from God. And we shouldn't take it for granted.

[19 : 29] We should recognize that God is giving us those breaths and without Him we would literally stop breathing. Of course breath isn't the only thing we need to survive.

which is why Jesus taught us to pray give us this day our daily bread. That prayer recognizes our dependency on the Heavenly Father for our sustenance.

Absolutely everything we need comes from Him. Listen as I read from Psalm 104. You speaking to God cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart.

Listen also to this passage from Amos 4 verses 6-9 this is God speaking. I gave you cleanness of teeth or the euphemistic way of saying empty stomachs.

I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities and lack of bread in all your places yet you did not return to me declares the Lord. I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest I would send rain on one city and send no rain on another city.

[20 : 58] One field would have rain and the field on which it did not rain would wither so two or three cities would wander to another city to drink water and would not be satisfied yet you did not return to me declares the Lord.

I struck you with blight and mildew your many gardens and your vineyards your fig trees and your olive trees the locusts devoured yet you did not return to me declares the Lord.

So there God asserts his direct his immediate control over nature over the world itself when he wants to provide food and water or anything else the people need he provides these things and when he chooses to withhold them when he chooses not to provide according to his sovereign will and purpose in that moment he has the power to withhold them.

More than that he can prevent crops from growing he can send bugs to eat away the plants he can dry up water supplies he can send a scorching sun he can send too much rain or too little rain he has complete control over everything we need to survive and to thrive and this is something we see over and over again in scripture of course.

Now having said that Jerry Bridges makes a really good point in his book about how easy it is for us to overlook that particular dependence on God unless you're a farmer you're not necessarily all that concerned about insects and weather right instead you go to work you get your paycheck you go to the grocery store you buy food you take it home you put it in your refrigerator or your pantry if you're a Costco shopper you may have a year's supply of some items you just don't think about it in short most of us aren't overly concerned about food and basic necessities now some people are I understand that we can easily take God for granted in this area of life assuming these things will always be there but God has control over more than the food that's growing in the fields he has control over your employment he has control over your paycheck he has control over the grocery store and the supply lines that bring the food to the grocery store he has control over your home and your refrigerator you're reminded of this every time the power goes out listen to this warning from Moses which he gave to the Israelites just before crossing into

[23 : 47] Canaan this is Deuteronomy 8 verse 10 Moses says take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes which I command you today lest when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied then your heart be lifted up and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt out of the house of slavery who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water who brought you water out of the flinty rock who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know that he might humble you and test you to do you good in the end beware lest you say in your heart my power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth you shall remember the Lord your God for it is he who gives you power to get wealth that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers as it is this day now I don't know that much commentary is really needed here

God provided for the Israelites God made the Israelites prosper but there's an important warning attached to this reminder which is don't forget God specifically don't forget him as the source of these things you know sometimes we say don't bite the hand that feeds you God says don't forget the hand that feeds you don't even forget the hand that feeds you don't ever assume that you have what you have by your own power and might or just because this is what you get this is just what it is God says I gave it to you and implied in this of course is that God can just as easily take it away in his institutes of the Christian religion John Calvin writes until men recognize that they owe everything to God that they are nourished by his fatherly care that he is the author of their every good that they should seek nothing beyond him they will never yield him willing service nay unless they establish their complete happiness in him they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him you know when I read that passage earlier this week

I had to sit back in my chair and say wow that's convicting unless they establish their complete happiness in him they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him have you ever wondered why John's first epistle ends with the exhortation little children keep yourselves from idols if you read through that letter you've noticed probably that that seems like a completely unrelated thought just kind of tacked on to the end of the letter that's about something altogether different well one of the things John addresses in that letter is the authenticity of believers you know are we really believers are we really saved how can we know we are saved well one thing's for sure if you want to doubt your sincerity if you want to give yourselves a reason to question your salvation well go find yourself some idols in other words find your happiness apart from

God find what you think you need apart from God again Calvin says unless they establish their complete happiness in him they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him we cannot serve God and money we cannot serve God and insert whatever else we might prioritize above God the God fearing person realizes that everything we have is from God we depend on him for everything so of course it never makes sense to prioritize anything above God anything he's our sustainer he's our source for sustenance he's our source for money and that's true whether we live in the agrarian society of ancient Israel or we live in the modern world of 21st century America we need him for everything so we depend on

God for life itself we depend on him for our sustenance we also depend on God for the successful execution of our plans we're probably all familiar with the following passage from James chapter 4 James writes come now you who say today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring what is your life for you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes instead you ought to say if the Lord wills we will do this or that we all make plans the problem is we tend to live with an assumption that our plans will always be successful don't we when we leave for work in the morning for instance we probably say goodbye to our families and we say something like

[29 : 47] I'll see you tonight somewhat naturally we assume our plans will be successful but James makes it clear that's actually arrogant it's actually arrogant to make that assumption he says in verse 16 as it is you boast in your arrogance all such boasting is evil it's arrogant to assume our plans will be successful simply because we made them or because we want them to be successful no our plans will be successful only when God wants them to be successful the verse that comes to my mind and probably comes to many of yours is Proverbs 16 9 the heart of man plans his ways but the Lord establishes his steps we plan but the Lord is going to move our feet exactly where he wants them to go to be clear there's nothing wrong with planning that's not the issue but we want to make our plans while we remain deliberately dependent upon

God as Jerry Bridges says occasionally we hear that some public event has been canceled due to circumstances beyond our control the fact is however all circumstances are beyond our control we are absolutely dependent upon God for the carrying out of our plans the person who fears God not only acknowledges this but delights to do so he or she finds great joy in realizing our dependence on the moment by moment caring of our loving sovereign heavenly father by the way we should keep in mind that our plans often rely on other people don't they whom we don't have any control over and we realize that but as Jerry Bridges points out we're not really dependent on other people we're dependent first and foremost on God so even if you leave out other people the plans are all about yourself no one else is needed you still depend on

God but if we do depend on people for example Proverbs 21 says the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord he turns it wherever he will so even when we depend on other people we ultimately rely on God and his will now in the remaining time let's see if we can't make some application of this it's one thing to believe we are dependent on him it's another thing to actively rely on him according to J.I.

Packer the primary way we do this is through prayer he says the prayer of a Christian is not an attempt to force God's hand but a humble acknowledgement of helplessness and dependence when we are on our knees we know that it is not we who control the world it is not in our power therefore to supply our needs by our own independent efforts every good thing we desire for ourselves and for others must be sought from God and will come if it comes at all as a gift from his hands I think that's a beautiful God fearing attitude practical it's very practical it's something that we can actively do in recognition to our utter dependence upon God we pray we pray for life we pray for the things that we need in life we pray for others we pray for our plans we pray without ceasing as

Paul says because we depend on God for everything every moment of every day now beyond praying we also need to believe that the Lord is capable of answering prayers I trust we do we need to have confidence in his ability a prayer in other words is not merely wishful thinking it's not wishful thinking we pray because we know God is sovereign we know he is all powerful we pray because we know that all things are possible with God in other words he can answer prayers we pray with an awareness that we're not God well there are many ways to apply that what I mean is we know we may not know I should say how God may answer prayers and

[34 : 44] I'm guessing we've all experienced an answer to prayer that came in a way that we never could have anticipated that's the wisdom of God and that's the limitation of our own minds part of what leads us to fear God is his infinite wisdom and knowledge we fear God and we depend on him because we're not even capable of knowing how he could answer some prayers and we don't have to know his ways are beyond us as he says in the book of Isaiah for as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts now with that said let me address the aspect of this that we may be less excited to hear about if we truly depend on God we have no choice but to accept his will and that's where it can be challenging we have no choice but to accept the decisions that he's made as he providentially works in our lives listen to what

David says in Psalm 139 verses 13 and 16 for you formed my inward parts you knitted me together in my mother's womb your eyes saw my unformed substance in your book were written every one of them the days that were formed for me when as yet there were none of them so David says that even before God made him God had plans he had ordained every day of his life and notice the humility there notice the submission to God's will he recognizes God's authority and power that his authority and power trump all David is not the master of his own domain he is dependent upon God his heavenly father every single day what does Paul say in first Thessalonians five rejoice always pray without ceasing give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of

God in Christ Jesus for you so that's an attitude of both dependence and acceptance Paul encourages us to pray because we depend on God then he exhorts us to give thanks for whatever God gives in every circumstance godly fear requires dependence and dependence requires acceptance Jesus said apart from me you can do nothing now up to this point I focused on our dependence on God for more material things but please understand that we depend on the sovereign Lord for everything spiritual as well in fact that's the context of John 15 where Jesus says apart from me you can do nothing do we want to grow in our faith we need God do we want to glean more from scripture when we read the

Bible or we hear sermons we need God do we want to become more effective evangelists we need God do we want to see our children grow up to know the Lord and be saved we need God whether we are baby Christians if you will or mature believers that have been in the faith for many years we are utterly dependent upon God and his grace every single moment for everything but like most things this deliberate dependence is a spiritual habit that develops over time we grow we mature it's a muscle to be exercised if you will so Jerry Bridges offers a brief list of very practical things we can we can do to grow in our dependence and

I'll just read the list to you first take time at the beginning of each day to acknowledge your dependence on God for life and breath and everything else during this time thank him for specific blessings both spiritual and material second think ahead through your day acknowledge your dependence on God for all your foreseen activities of the day asking for his direction and enablement in each of them third commit to him the unforeseen events of the day again asking for his ability to respond to each in a way pleasing to him so you'll notice you're recognizing what you have planned as well as those things that you don't have planned those things that you can't foresee fourth seek to develop the habit of continually offering throughout the day those short silent prayers that recognize your powerlessness and his power use whatever reminder strategies will help you to develop this habit such as sticky notes in strategic places or the hourly chime on your wristwatch alarm don't consider such methods too childish or unscriptural to help you with this important habit

[40 : 37] Paul said pray without ceasing so whatever that takes you need some sticky notes write some sticky notes lastly he says most of all pray regularly that God will help you and make you more and more aware that you are in fact dependent on him for life and breath and everything else with that let's close in prayer heavenly father we do want to come to you in prayer to acknowledge our helplessness to acknowledge that we are not the masters of our domain that we do not have control over what will come our way and at the same time we want to humbly ask that you would provide for us what we need both the material things as well as the spiritual things we pray that you will give us what you deem to be best for us in every situation every moment of every day and help us to accept that when our plans are not carried out the way that we thought they would be or the way that we wanted them to be that we will look to you that we will understand that you work all things together for our good and for your glory and that you would help us to not complain not to murmur but to accept your will and to be thankful beyond that to always be grateful for what you have given us understanding that you have given us precisely precisely what we need it may not be what the next door neighbor has it may not be what we think we should have but your gifts are perfect and so we thank you and we just ask that your spirit would be with us moment after moment to help us recognize this dependence and accept your will in all cases

I pray this in Christ's name amen