Sermon Series: Words of Wisdom in a Whacked-Out World
Sermon Title: Facing Your Fears

Text: **Proverbs 18:10 -- The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe; Proverbs 28:1 -- The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion; Proverbs 29:25 – The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe**.

Introduction: For the past several years **Chapman University in California** has conducted a revealing annual survey titled **the Chapman University Survey of American Fears**. **The study identifies what Americans fear so much that they lie in bed, wide awake, unable to fall asleep thinking about them**. The latest survey, referred to as **Wave 9**, was administered in the **spring of 2023**. The results were published that fall. Here are the **top 10 fears of Americans** according to this survey: (**1**) **Corrupt government officials;** (**2**) **Economic/financial collapse**; (**3**) **Russia using nuclear weapons**; (**4**) **The U.S. becoming involved in another world war**; (**5**) **People I love becoming seriously ill**; (**6**) **People I love dying**; (**7**) **Pollution of drinking water**; (**8**) **Biological warfare**; (**9**) **Cyber-terrorism**; and (**10**) **Not having enough money for the future**. **Note that seven of the ten have to do with harm that can be inflicted upon us by someone else**. I think all of us can relate to these fears to a certain degree. It's one thing if we make trouble for ourselves, but another when we feel victimized by the foolish/evil practices of others. **As Christians, however, we need to remember that God does not want us to make our choices in life according to what we're most frightened of**. This is what Paul says to Timothy in **2 Timothy 1:7 – God has not given us a spirit of fear.** Because we put our faith in the Lord, we can trust that He will give us the power, love and self-discipline to do whatever He commands.

This brings us to our topic in the **fifth message** from the book of Proverbs in our series "**Words of Wisdom for a Whacked-Out (Crazy) World**. Specifically, this morning I want to look at the way that FEAR which troubles so many today, adversely impacted the nation of Israel and how we can apply some of the lessons we can learn from their experience to our situations. Let me set the context for you from **Numbers 13**.

Context: After leaving Egypt and watching God do all kinds of miracles for His people, they eventually made their way to the doorstep of the Promised Land. It was called that because God had promised to displace the Canaanites from the land and give it to the Israelites. **Deuteronomy 9:4-5** tells us the reason why: "**After the Lord your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, "The Lord has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness." No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is going to drive them out before you**." The Canaanites were marked by the worst possible aspects of SLAVERY (**Not that there's anything good about slavery, but think of taking slavery to the darkest place that you can possibly take it.**), RELIGIOUS PROSTITUTION and SEXUAL CULTS. Scholars have referred to the Canaanite culture as ***the most sexually depraved of any in the ancient world***. They had given themselves over to every kind of sexual deviancy, including incest and even bestiality. At their worst, their orgiastic worship of idols even included **human sacrifice—both of children and adults**. There's even imagery of their cult sexual practices of bathing themselves in blood. **Obviously, God had enough of their wickedness so He planned to give their land to the Israelites**. THIS IS WHERE WE PICK UP THE STORY AND DISCOVER FOUR WAYS THE FEAR OF MAN CAN LEAD GOD'S PEOPLE ASTRAY.

The Fear of Canaanites Distracted the Israelites. In order to receive the land of promise, God's original commission was simply for all of Israel to "**Go in and take possession of (it)**" (**Deuteronomy 1:8**). It was, after all, the land He promised to give them. But when there was some reluctance on the part of the people, God graciously consented to permit them to send out some of their leaders on a RECONNAISSANCE MISSION. "**Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. From each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a chief among them**" (**Numbers 13:2**). And that's what Moses did. He selected twelve men, one from each of the twelve tribes, and commissioned them to "**Go up into the Negeb and go up**

into the hill country, and see what the land is, and whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land that they dwell in is good or bad, and whether the cities that they dwell in are camps or strongholds, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be of good courage and bring some of the fruit of the land" (**Numbers 13:17-20**). They obeyed and secretly surveyed the land for forty days. When they returned, the spies had indeed brought back some of the fruit and confirmed that the land flowed with milk and honey. **However, they also took note that the people who lived there were very strong and the cities were fortified and very large**. They even observed that a large race of people, the descendants of Anak like there. That's when their courage began to wane and fear began to creep in distracting them from the original purpose for which they were sent – to spy out the land. **As you know, the word DISTRACT means to 'turn aside or divert" or "direct in a different direction."** In the case of the majority of the spies sent out by Moses, this is exactly what happened. "***Sure***," they reasoned, "***the land was just as God had described, but how in the world were they going to be able to launch a military campaign that had any hope of success***!" Now, it's important to notice that from the beginning God had never put the responsibility for victory on their shoulders but His. **God owns the whole earth after all** (**Exodus 19:5 – the whole earth is mine**) **and it is His right to give any portion of it to anyone He chooses as well as take it away**. Somehow, those spies, overcome with the fear of their adversaries, sadly lost their way. They became DISTRACTED. **Proverbs 29:25 warns of this possibility when it says, "The fear of man lays a snare (a trap) but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe**." FEAR OF MAN HAS A WAY OF DIVERTING OUR FOCUS FROM BEING GOD-CENTERED TO MAN-CENTERED AND THAT ALWAYS LEADS TO A NEGATIVE OUTCOME.

The fear of the Canaanites Diminished the Israelites. As a result of being overcome by their fear of those currently inhabiting the Promised Land, the spies (**not including Caleb and Joshua**), decided to bring a negative report to the people. They said, "**The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim**). **If this wasn't bad enough, it's what they said next that drove a dagger into the hearts of the Israelites and kept them from obeying God and moving forward**. "**We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them**." **Notice the order in which they talked about their loss of courage**. **FIRST**, they began to see themselves as mere insects and **THEN**, they were viewed the same way by their enemies. THAT'S THE THING ABOUT FEARING MAN RATHER THAN GOD. WHEN THIS HAPPENS TO GOD'S PEOPLE, THE FIRST AND WORST EFFECT IS ALWAYS ON OURSELVES. Whatever faith we possess is replaced by our fear and anxieties. SELF-RESPECT GIVES WAY TO SELF-DENAGRATION. **POWERFUL PEOPLE BEGIN TO SEEM LIKE VERY WEAK PEOPLE**! This was a real problem for Israel at a key moment in its history, and it is a real problem today for many Western Nations today. An article in *The Financial Times* (8-22-23) claims that "**the west is suffering from a crisis of courage**." The author, **Jemima Kelly**, notes: And the problem is much broader than politics. Society itself seems to be suffering from a crisis of courage … **Virtue signaling might be endemic (popular), but courage is not deemed a virtue worth signaling**. Indeed, all the incentives are stacked on the opposite side: ***there is LITTLE TO LOSE from going along with what everyone is saying, even if you don't believe it yourself, and even MUCH TO GAIN from proving that you are on the "right" side.*** **Courage — sticking your head above the parapet and saying what you really think — can, conversely, get you into a huge amount of trouble, and, usually, you are not rewarded for it**. The mere mention of courage has been in decline for a long time. **A 2012 paper in the *Journal of Positive Psychology*** that tracked how frequently words related to moral excellence appeared in American books — both fiction and non-fiction — over the 20th century, found that the use of the words "**courage, bravery and fortitude**" had fallen by two-thirds over the period. Moral courage does not equate to recklessness, and neither does it mean being a provocateur for the sake of it **… But if we want our societies to thrive, we must be courageous enough to think for ourselves and stand up for what we believe in**. The late writer **Maya Angelou** was right when she said: "***Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently***." (**Review: Fear of the Canaanites distracted and diminished the Israelites**.)

The fear of the Canaanites Divided the Israelites. Once they heard the bad report, the Israelites raised a loud cry and wept all night. The next morning, scripture says they "**grumbled against Moses and Aaron and said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt**." It was only **Joshua, Caleb, Moses and Aaron** who possessed the courage to see the situation very differently. Joshua and Caleb tore their clothes (as a sign of grief over the people's reluctance to trust God) and said to everyone, "**The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. 9 Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them**." **You would think this brief speech would have inspired the Israelites to walk by faith and not by their fears, but it did not**. In fact, they responded with a call **to stone these four men** and appoint a new leader so they could return to Egypt and the slavery they had known for four hundred years. HOW INCREDIBLY SAD! **The people of the only true God were so overcome by fear that they preferred to live in bondage to the Egyptians than to trust the Lord and follow their leaders into a new land flowing with milk and honey**. They became a nation divided with four men on one side and an entire nation on the other.

The fear of the Canaanites Defeated the Israelites. Because of their lack of faith in the Lord, God told Moses that He planned to strike the Israelites with **pestilence** (some sort of pandemic) and **disinherit them**. It wasn't until Moses interceded for the people before the Lord that He relented. Still, God's chastening was severe. **Numbers 14:21-25 says, "…truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it. But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it**." **AND YOU KNOW THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED**. Israel lived as wandering nomads in the desert for forty years until every adult, twenty years old and upward who feared man more than God died off. It would be the next generation who would find the faith in the Lord to follow Joshua into the Promised Land. **THE PROBLEM WITH THE FEAR OF MAN IS THAT IT ROBS PEOPLE OF THE WILL TO FIGHT AND DOOMS THEM TO DEFEAT**.

On **June 27, 1988**, **Mike Tyson fought Michael Spinks for the heavyweight championship of the world**. Each man at the time laid claim to the title, so the fight was billed as **ONCE AND FOR ALL** – the match that would determine the true champion. I'm not a big boxing fan, but it had such hype around it that I couldn't wait to hear who won. Unfortunately, at the time I was on a mission trip in a part of the world where the news doesn't come for quite some time. In fact, I had to wait until I returned to the states to read an article in Sports Illustrated about the fight and its outcome. Here's how Pat Putnam, a writer who covered the fight, described it: As the challenger, the 31-year-old Spinks entered the ring first after the long delay. When he removed his robe, his 6'2½" body looked trim carrying 212¼ pounds, his heaviest weight ever, but it was dry. Spinks is a notoriously slow starter; it did not bode well that he hadn't warmed up properly. By contrast, the 21-year-old Tyson was glistening as he prowled the ring during the introductions, and at the opening bell, he pounced and threw a left hook that caught Spinks high on his head. "**I noticed the fear come into his eyes then**," Tyson said later. Spinks seemed to sag after the punch, a telling bit of body language common to Tyson's opponents the first time they absorb a solid blow from him. **At that moment of violent impact, survival suddenly becomes much more important than victory. Unleashed at last, Tyson the Terrible knocked out Spinks in just 91 seconds—four seconds fewer than it took Jeffrey Osborne to sing the prefight national anthem**.

What have we observed this morning about how fear adversely affected the Israelites? **IT DISTRACTED, DIMINISHED, DIVIDED, AND DEFEATED THEM**). **In the Bible, the opposite of fear is not courage, it is faith.**

Solomon tells us that people of faith are those who fear the Lord. He says this in **Proverbs 9:10 -- The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is insight**. If you want to acquire wisdom to know what to do in any situation then recognize that it starts with ***reverencing and obeying God by faith*** no matter what. Here's what happens when God's people fear the Lord, not man.

When we fear the Lord, He directs our paths. Remember that to fear God is to obey him, to trust that He knows what He's doing at all times. Proverbs 3:5-6 says this, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. I like the Message translation – **He will keep you on track**. What this proverb is saying is this: **trusting in Him as opposed to trusting in our ourselves is the right path if you want your life to stay in step with His plan**. The Israelites didn't fear God and as a result, lost their way.

When we fear the Lord, He gives us courage. Proverbs 28:1 -- The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion. Who are the righteous? They're the ones who do what's right, not in the eyes of man, but in the eyes of God. Had the Israelites obeyed the Lord, He would have given them the courage to do what He commanded.

When we fear the Lord, He brings us together. Ephesians 5:21 – Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. When we fear the Lord, says the Apostle Paul, we mutually submit ourselves to one another. This kind of attitude brings unity, not division.

When we fear the Lord, He leads us to victory. **Proverbs 21:31** reminds us that "**victory rests with the Lord**" and not with the consensus of the people.

Conclusion: **When we fear God, He directs our paths, gives us courage, brings us together and leads us to victory**. **Oswald Chambers** once said, "***The remarkable thing about God is that when you fear Him, you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else.***" Solomon reminds us, "**The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe**" (**Proverbs 18:10**). What's he saying? **God's reputation is built on His ability to care for those who fully trust in and fear Him no matter what's going on around us**. **John Piper**, in his book, **The Pleasures of God**, describes what this is like. Suppose you were exploring an unknown Greenland glacier in the dead of winter. Just as you reach the sheer cliff with a spectacular view of miles of jagged ice and mountains of snow, a terrible storm breaks in. The wind is so strong that the fear rises in your heart that it might blow you over the cliff. But in the midst of the storm, you discover a cleft in the ice where you can hide. Here you feel secure. But, even though secure, the awesome might of the storm rages on, and you watch it with a kind of trembling pleasure as it surges out across the distant glaciers. Not everything we call fear vanishes from your heart, only the life-threatening part. There remains the trembling, the awe, the wonder, the feeling that you would never want to tangle with such a storm or be the adversary of such a power. And so it is with God. The fear of God is what is left of the storm when you have a safe place to watch right in the middle of it. Hope turns fear into a trembling and peaceful wonder, and fear takes everything trivial out of hope and makes it earnest and profound. *John Piper, The Pleasures of God (Multnomah, 1991), pp. 205-206*

So, our choice in life is the same as the Israelites. Who are we going to fear? God or man? I recommend we fear God and watch Him work when we do.