



**WHEN FEARS OVERWHELM**

Today we're thinking fear. To kick things off, here's a list of random phobias: hazard a guess as to what you think they might be referring to:

- Nyctophobia ... the dark or the night.
- Aichmophobia ... needles or pointed objects.
- Aviophobia ... flying.
- Ecclesiophobia ... church (I suffer that every Sunday).
- Ophidiophobia ... (think Indiana Jones). Snakes!
- Decidophobia ... I was undecided about this one ...
- Genuphobia ... knees.
- Pentheraphobia ... the mother-in-law (no comment!).
- Ballistophobia ... bullets (perfectly rational to me).
- Phobophobia ... phobias. And a bonus one:
- Hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia ... long words!

We tend to use the Greek word *phobia* of irrational fear, but originally, it referred to fear in general. But whether our fears are rational or irrational (or irrational to others but perfectly rational to us!), the fact is, we all have them.

And that is the subject of today's psalm:

## Psalm 95

The psalm begins by encouraging us to worship *Yahveh*, because He's bigger and better than the rest (vs1-3). Now, it might just be me, but that seems a weird thing to say, doesn't it? Because the Bible says there *are* no other gods apart from *Yahveh*! So, who are these 'gods' referred to here?

At the time this psalm was written, the Israelites were surrounded by various very powerful nations (think Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians), and these nations would take the scariest things in life and make gods out of them. So, the psalmist here targets the scariest gods in the Phoenician / Canaanite religion and says, "Our God is greater than that." And in the process, he says a lot about the things that scare us, too – and how to overcome them.

There are 3 points in particular. God is ...

**1) Greater Than Death.** Vs4 says: "In His hand are the depths of the earth." This phrase was used of *Mot*, the Canaanite god of death. The Canaanites depicted *Mot* as a hideous creature with a huge mouth, ready to gobble us up. But Psalm 95 paints a very different picture: death is nothing to be afraid of, because God is bigger!

Other passages say something similar, e.g. Psalm 23: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of *mot*, I will fear no evil." And Isaiah 25: "He will swallow up *mot* for ever" (i.e. God eats death instead of death eating us!).

And then, of course, there's Jesus. All through His ministry, Jesus demonstrated His power over death by beating it: He raised the widow's son (Luke 7); Jairus' daughter (Luke 8); and Lazarus (John 11). And then, to cap it all, He raised Himself! And when Jesus comes back, the promise is that death itself will be swallowed up, once and for all (Revelation 21:4).

Hence the psalmist's words in this song.

**2) Greater Than The Mountains.** Look again at the second half of vs4: "The mountain peaks belong to Him."

The Canaanites used this phrase of *Ba'al*, the harvest or storm god. *Ba'al* was supposed to live on the top of a mountain, a picture of things that are bigger than us – the challenging circumstances of life. And again, the psalmist is saying, "You don't have to be afraid of those mountains (even if you have a fear of heights / falling / landing!). God is bigger than that."

Which is perhaps why God appeared to Moses as a burning bush, where? On a mountain. And why He gave the 10 Commandments there, too. It might also be why Micah talks about God melting mountains and Zechariah talks about Him flattening them. And why Jesus talked about moving mountains (Matthew 17) and gave the Great Commission standing on one!

The message is this: no matter how big that mountain might be ... God is *bigger*!

**3) Greater Than The Sea.** Vs5 tells us, "The sea is His ..." The Hebrew for 'sea' is an Ugaritic word, *yamm*. No, not a sweet potato, but a sea-deity, the

god of chaos and destruction and all things uncontrollable. And even with all our technology, the sea still is.

But it's *not* God.

This is one of the reasons God parted the Red Sea. The plagues that God unleashed on the Egyptians were a swipe at the gods that they worshipped – and the parting of the Red Sea was no different. It's also why Job 41 and Isaiah 51 describe *Yahveh* as having control of a couple of crocs called *Livyatan* and *Rahab* - creatures that were supposed to belong to the god *Yamm*. And then, again, there's Jesus Himself. In the NT, we find Jesus calming the sea and walking on it (Matthew 8, 14). And, in Revelation 21:1, we're told: "And there was no more sea." Does God hate swimming? No - but He does hate evil. And when Jesus returns, evil will be gone, forever.

So that's *Yamm*, the god of sea.

Only he's not – because only *Yahveh* is!

### **Do Not Be Afraid**

Now Psalm 95 ends with a word of warning (vs8-11): fear can prevent us from obeying God and enjoying His blessings. That's what happened to the Israelites on the way to the Land of Canaan. Their fear of dying almost drove them to rebellion, which is why they called the place *Massah* (rebellion), and *Meribah* (testing). Eventually they refused to enter the Promised Land and wandered around the desert until that generation dropped dead. And sometimes, we can be guilty of the same thing, e.g.:

- Not-yet Christians who are too afraid to follow Jesus.
- Christians who shy away from sharing their faith.
- Churches that are terrified of doing things differently.

What's the solution? One word: trust.

Fears are something we all possess, some of them going back to childhood (and some because of it): situations, people, disease, memories, the natural world, the supernatural world. How can we learn to overcome such things? Well, sometimes God chases them away overnight, for others it's a process. But the closer we get to Jesus, the more we realise that He is bigger than our biggest nightmares, greater than our greatest fears.

Or as Psalm 95 puts it, He is "the great God, and the great King above *all* gods."