



I will be the first to admit to you I do not know the Bible as well as I should. I did not grow up with parents or Sunday school teachers, even college or seminary professors, who insisted I memorize verses word-by-word. That is not how I grew to thoroughly appreciate God's cherished story from our human perspective. So, more often than not, when I get into any Bible study setting, all the people who did not go to seminary can quote chapter and verse much, much more proficiently than I ever will.

One such lightyears-ahead-of-me student of the Bible was a man named Carl. He grew up in the good 'ole days of the Lutheran church, when you had to spend entire Saturday mornings for Confirmation in the basement fellowship hall. And, in order to actually "pass" Confirmation, the pastor would go one-by-one to each student in front of the entire congregation, and Carl had to not only be able to quote Scripture, but Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* as well. I got to meet Carl decades after those "good 'ole days."

He would sit at the end of this long wooden table for our Bible study gatherings. He would plop his hat down in front of him, signaling that he was ready to go: ready to dive into the Scripture that he was forced to learn so many years before, but still grateful for the opportunity to engage in any way he could later in life. Now, he wasn't the show-off type in terms of needing to impress the rest of us with just how much he knew chapter and verse of whatever book of the Bible; but he did have his fair share of ones he often turned to when the opportunity arose in our discussions. One was from the 111th Psalm that we spoke together this morning: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

But Carl was not just the regurgitating kind of life-long student, only rattling off memorized words. He knew that *fear* word was not the most accurate translation. Even if during those "good 'ole days" of the Lutheran church, when plenty of parents and Sunday school teachers and pastors would take full advantage of that *fear* word to instill strict discipline and controlled order with children in the pews and fellowship hall basements and the homes; Carl learned over the years that this God is not meant to be scared of, to be so incredibly afraid about disappointing in the slightest, lest we spend eternity in a not-so-pleasant place. No, "[being in awe] of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." And Carl and I got to learn the true power of those revised words not around that long wooden table, but outside the church walls altogether.

Carl's wife was one of the first calls I ever got in the middle of the night in my life, and so, immediately, I knew something was wrong. Carl had suffered a stroke and was on his way to the hospital. With his advanced age and the severity of the case, his outlook did not look promising, to say the least. The family gathered in the ER. I offered a prayer, struggling to find the words. The family had to decide whether or not to allow doctors to give him a certain medication that wasn't meant to be used for patients with so many years under their belt, but they all knew their beloved husband, father, grandfather was still a stubborn refused-to-ever-give-up German from those good 'ole days, who fought in a World War, and whose family persevered through a Great Depression. The family gave the go-ahead, knowing full-well the risks. And, sure enough, Carl lasted through the night, weeks in the ICU and step-down units before returning home to his wife for years after that near-fateful night.

Of course, when it was all said and done, Carl could have very well been the quoting chapter-and-verse guy, and give plenty of supporting evidence that it all turned out for the good, because God decided to send a holy dose of a miracle directly from the heavens to that very hospital. However, Carl had a different kind of wisdom, a different kind of awe for the holy-workings of the Lord. Carl was in awe of the Lord inspiring medical researchers to come up with a complex drug that could save God-only-knows how many lives from the bleakest circumstances, as if God and science were not opposed to one another, but could feed off each other, including in pandemic times. Carl was in awe of God bursting with love and joy through his family as they insisted to surround him with compassionate embraces in that ER room in the middle of the night. Carl was in awe of God not just working at a far-off heavenly distance, but in the midst of the lives right beside him, as just as much then as the good 'ole days decades before.

Yes, even after all of that, Carl could still quote his fair share of chapter-and-verse from the Bible, but Carl knew full well that was *not* the beginning of wisdom. And that being so scared of an almighty all-powerful God working from a most intimidating bully-pulpit in heaven, was not the kind of wisdom God yearned for us. The awe of the Lord brings about the most precious wisdom of all, and it is not reserved for church fellowship hall basements or in the pages of the Bible. All great places to be sure, but God insists on unleashing much more for us to marvel at in this life, even in death. It just so happened that Carl himself died a few weeks ago, where our Lord promises to meet all of us with a most marvelous awe over just how much he cherishes each one of us, regardless of our Bible memorization proficiency.

Yes, Carl may no longer be able to sit at the end of that wooden table, but his wisdom that became all the more fully realized that sacred night years ago; that most certainly continues with his family, and for all of us to know just how much God continues to bring a different kind of awe-inspiring miracle in the places and people we often take for granted, not just on the special days, but all the days of this life. And for the most spectacular awe of the Lord that was brought to life on the cross to set us free forever from that *fear* over sin and death, so that we may experience the precious gift of new life each and every day, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!