

**A Safe Distance from God, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. E4090201**  
**Deuteronomy 18:15-20 and Mark 1:21-28**  
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Have you ever noticed where people sit in church? Many have their favorite seats. They become accustomed to that place. It “feels right.” Where you sit sometimes depends upon what time you arrive. If you come late, you might have to sit closer to the front. Some people are uncomfortable with that. The front row seats are often empty, not just here, but in most churches. It wasn't always that way, though. There used to be a “pew tax” in New England churches. Worshipers would have to pay for their seat. Guess which ones cost more? The front ones! It may have had to do with fashion. Those who could afford finer clothes wanted to be seen by all those behind.

If we had such a pew tax today, it might be the seats in back, nearer to the door which cost more. People want to be able to get out when things get too hot. It might have to do with the preacher's volume, or the danger of the preacher's message, or the preacher's breath.

The issue might have to do not so much with the proximity to the preacher as the proximity to God. It is scary to get too close to God. We want to be a comfortably safe distance from God. We want to be able to get away when we need to.

There is a phrase we don't use much today, “Fear of God.” We would rather say “Love of God,” or “respect of God.” Why should fear characterize a relationship with God? It means respect, reverence, and the fear of God's judgment of human actions. It is reflected in the Deuteronomy passage, “If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.”<sup>1</sup> People believed if they got too close to God, they would die. Is that why the front row seats are empty? If I sit up here, I might be too close to God and I might die!

Keeping a safe distance from God is a driving force. It was behind much of the controversy in the Roman Catholic church forty-five years ago when the mass was changed from Latin into English. Instead of a comfortable distance through a language barrier for the common person, worshipers now hear in plain English, the demands of God. Frankly, they are quite uncomfortable. A safe distance was behind the controversy in the publication of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible sixty years ago. The comfortable distance created by Elizabethan English was cut by hearing God's word in the common language.

We fear being too close to God because we know how demanding God is. To some extent, Moses changed that fear of closeness. He developed a relationship with God and lived. When he saw that fire of God on Sinai, he had the courage to walk right up and talk with God. Moses became a mediator between God and the people of Israel.

Sometimes we need a mediator between us and God. The best mediator is Jesus. He has revealed to us the nature of God. He taught the disciples the proper relationship. He told them to think of God as a “Parent.” He taught them to pray “Our Father.” He taught obedience and awe of God.

Jesus is part of a long line of “mediators.” His predecessors were the prophets and the first of those was Moses. He was on a mountain tending sheep when he received a call from God to lead God's people and set them free from Egyptian bondage. Moses spoke the word of God, a word that was not pleasant for Pharaoh or the Israelites to hear. While Moses was a prophet, his

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<sup>1</sup>Deuteronomy 18:16

brother Aaron acted as priest, relating to people and their needs.

There is a long list of prophets and priests who came before Jesus: Joshua, Deborah, Nathan, Amos, Isaiah, etc. Jesus' successors are the rabbis, priests, and ministers today.

If I may plead my case, it is not easy being a minister: being a mediator between God and people. It is an awesome responsibility. There is a tension between speaking the comfort of God and speaking the judgment of God which is not comfortable to hear.

It is dangerous to serve as a minister. The false prophet presumes to speak a word in God's name, but God hasn't commanded it to be spoken. The false prophet will die! Do I want to be a minister? If I say the wrong thing, I'm doomed. I'm not comfortable being close to God.

I wonder, am I uncomfortable being close to God or uncomfortable with myself? Am I uncomfortable knowing that if I get too close to God, and God knows my flaws, God might reject me?

We run to Jesus' arms because he is a mediator. Do we get too close to Jesus as a friend and companion, and too far from God, the mighty creator who demands obedience and awe? It is indeed difficult to figure out the safe distance from God.

There is no "safe distance" from God. We can not escape from God by sitting near the door, nor by not coming to church. God is all around.

God's demands are no less severe today than they were in Biblical days. Sooner or later, we must meet God face to face and be held accountable for our actions. We might as well do what we know is right, ethical, humane, and loving.

Jesus shows us the proper distance from God. It is the proper mixture of respect and comfort. We don't have to be afraid of dying the way the Israelites were, but, we should be afraid of God more than anything else in the world. Our God is a loving God, a God who cares and holds us in the palm of God's hand, who loves us as a mother or father loves their child, who wants us to be close, and who continually seeks us out. If that's the worst we have to fear, we don't have to fear anything else. We don't have to fear employers, the economic situation, the judgements of our peers, or the loss of friends because of our bad breath. We don't have to fear death itself.

We are a safe distance from God: far enough away that we know we are creatures and God is the creator, and close enough to know God holds us in an everlasting hug of love.