In his book *Every Man, God’s Man* Kenny Luck tells the story of a senior sales executive named Danny. Danny was a Christian man who faithfully attended church. But he was also focused on his job, and he was a tough boss. One of his sales managers, Cameron, had been late to a quarterly sales meeting, and Danny had chewed him out in front of everyone for his tardiness and his drop in sales the previous quarter.

Then Danny saw another one of his employees at church one day. As they talked, his employee told him to be praying for Cameron because in the last few months his wife’s cancer had come back and Cameron was devastated.

You can probably guess how Danny felt. He was ashamed that he had ignored the things going on in Cameron’s life because he was so focused on his job and the bottom line. He was so wrapped up in his own world that he didn’t see or care about what was going on in the lives of others.

I tell that story because often times we treat God the same way Danny treated his employee. We get so wrapped up in our world and our own circumstances that we respond to God in exactly the wrong way. We ignore what God might have for us because we aren’t paying attention to him. When we hear about the love and the grace of God we don’t respond with faith.

We typically respond to God in one of three ways: pride, fear, or faith. God obviously wants us to respond to him in faith. He wants us to believe him and to follow after him. Unfortunately when we respond in pride or in fear, we aren’t doing either one.

Now those ideas of responding to God in pride, fear, or faith are kind of abstract. They might be hard for us to understand in practical terms. So what I’d like to do today is to take a look at how people responded to God in the Bible in these three different ways so we can see what that looks like and we can learn how to respond to God in faith ourselves.

The first way we can respond to God is through pride. In 586 BC God had enough of the idolatry of the people of Judah, so he sent the Babylonians to destroy the city of Jerusalem and to take the Israelite people captive into Babylon. During that time Babylon was the most powerful nation on earth. They had the greatest military strength, and like the Assyrians before them they sought to conquer as much of the world as they possibly could. The man at the top, the king of Babylon was Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar was basically all powerful within his kingdom. What he said went no matter what. And this particular king was known for being cruel and ruthless. The historical accounts of what the Babylonians did to the people they laid siege to are pretty horrific and Nebuchadnezzar’s punishments for those who didn’t do what he wanted them to do were equally ruthless.

Nebuchadnezzar is the one who very nearly killed all his wise men and advisors because they couldn’t tell him what he dreamed about and interpret it. They were saved only because God gave Daniel the gift of interpreting dreams and showed him what the king’s dream was.

He’s also the one who demanded that all his officials worship a statue as a god. The punishment for not bowing down to this idol at the king’s command was to be burned alive. That’s the idol Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down to. When they were cast into the furnace to be burned alive, they survived without a hair on their heads being singed. There was no eighth amendment in Babylon that forbade cruel and unusual punishment. There was only the will and whim of a king who seemed to enjoy making people suffer.

Nebuchadnezzar was used to that kind of power. He was used to getting his way and making sure everyone was afraid of him and followed his orders without question. He also thought pretty highly of himself.

Even after the show of God’s power that he saw with his own eyes when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were saved from the flames, he still saw himself as the top dog. He thought that everyone ought to bow down to him and praise him for his majesty and power. He seemed to think that he had a godlike status. That’s when Nebuchadnezzar found out who was really God.

**Daniel 4:30–32 ESV — 30** and the king answered and said, “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” **31** While the words were still in the king’s mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, “O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, **32** and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.”

That’s exactly what happened. This high and mighty king was suddenly out grazing with the cows in the field instead of dining at the banquet halls in the palace. It wasn’t until seven years later that his mind was finally restored and he finally acknowledged God for who he really is.

Something similar happened to Herod Agrippa in Acts 12. Again, Herod was a cruel and ruthless leader used to getting his way, and he wasn’t afraid to make people suffer to get it. He was from a long line of men who were exactly the same way.

(Herod family tree picture) Herod the Great is the Herod we read about in the early pages of the Gospels. He’s the one the wise men went to when they came to Jerusalem, and he’s also the one who slaughtered babies in Bethlehem to keep his power and position.

His son Herod Antipas is who we read about throughout most of the Gospels. He was the one who was a part of Jesus’ trial before he was crucified, and he’s also the one who put John the Baptist to death to please his wife.

His nephew, Herod the Great’s grandson, is the Herod we’re talking about here in Acts 12. He’s the one who had the Apostle James executed and subsequently had arrested Peter just to please his constituents.

**Acts 12:21–23 ESV — 21** On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. **22** And the people were shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” **23** Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

God’s issue with Nebuchadnezzar was that he acted as if he deserved the glory and majesty that belong to God alone. His issue with Herod wasn’t anything Herod said himself. It was that he didn’t correct people when they called him a god. He allowed people to revere him in a way that should be reserved for God alone. He allowed himself to be honored and revered as an idol, and it cost him his life.

Now those are pretty extreme examples of people responding to God in pride. One that’s a little closer to home might be the Pharisees and Jewish leaders. When Jesus taught, when he healed people, and when he led his disciples to follow after him the Jewish leaders weren’t happy with what he was doing.

They grumbled about who Jesus spent time with. They complained about the disciples not following their laws about washing hands. Others complained that the disciples didn’t fast as they did. They complained because they thought that their ways and their rules were better than the ways of Jesus.

Later in his ministry, the Pharisees challenged Jesus to tell them by whose authority he did the things he was doing. If the Pharisees were modern day folks, they would say, “Who do you think you are to tell us what to do?” How many times have you heard someone say that in response to God?

We fall prey to responding to God in pride all the time. Pride is the reason that much of the world will never even give Jesus a second thought. If they can even be convinced that God exists, they certainly don’t think they need him.

1. We respond to God in pride when we think we know better than God

When the scientific community dismisses the idea of God as a fantasy because they can’t prove it through their experiments and tests, that’s responding to God in pride.

When a person says that they don’t need God, that they can handle their life and their decisions on their own, they are responding to God in pride.

The audacity and arrogance it takes for us to say that kind of thing about God or even to God is incredible. That would be like me telling Peyton Manning, “You know I think if you hold the football this certain way, you’ll be able to make those longer passes.” That would be like me telling Warren Buffet how he could improve his investments. That would be like me telling Tiger Woods how to sink that big putt. For us to think we know better than God is pure arrogance and pride.

1. We also respond to God in pride when we think what we want is more important than what God wants

I think this is probably what affects us in the realm of pride more than anything else. When push comes to shove, what gets your devotion? What becomes your priority? For many people, everything else on the calendar comes before God. Work, their kids sporting events, hobbies.

How many times have you heard someone say that they would make time for God when life slowed down a little. They would make God a priority when they have more time. They would start coming to church after they retired. I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, but life doesn’t tend to slow down much. Whether you make time for God and follow after him all depends on if you are willing to make God a priority. When we don’t, our pride is getting in the way of our relationship with God.

Pride is a kind of idolatry. When our response to God is that whatever is on our schedule or whatever we desire is more important than God, then we have put ourselves in the place that only God should occupy in our lives.

**Exodus 20:3 ESV — 3** “You shall have no other gods before me.

That means that God should be the most important thing in our lives. That means that we can’t be the most important thing in our lives. When we make ourselves the most important thing in our lives we knock God out of the place that only he deserves. When we do that, we are responding to God in pride and not in faith as we should.

Jesus said **Matthew 22:37–38 ESV — 37** ...“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. **38** This is the great and first commandment.

If we love ourselves more than we love God, we are not following his commandments and not putting God first in our lives. When we do that we are falling prey to exactly the kind of attitude that makes us respond to God in pride instead of faith.

The second way that we can respond to God is in fear. When we respond to God in fear it’s either because we’re afraid that following God is going to cost us something or we’re afraid that God isn’t going to come through for us and do what he says he will do.

Moses’ first encounter with God has fear written all over it. God appeared to him as a burning bush, and when Moses came near, God spoke to him. God told him that he was going to send Moses to Pharaoh to free his people from slavery in Egypt. Moses immediately had a list of excuses for why he couldn’t go because he was afraid.

**Exodus 3:11 ESV — 11** But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?”

Moses was afraid he wouldn’t be good enough. He didn’t have enough clout. He wasn’t powerful enough to tell Pharaoh what to do.

**Exodus 3:13 ESV — 13** Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

Moses was afraid he wouldn’t know all the right answers. He was afraid to be put on the spot an not know what to say.

**Exodus 4:1 ESV — 1** Then Moses answered, “But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you.’ ”

Moses was afraid that even if people listened to him, they wouldn’t believe him. He didn’t want to go to all the trouble of going in front of Pharaoh if people weren’t going to believe him anyway.

**Exodus 4:10 ESV — 10** But Moses said to the Lord, “Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.”

A lot of people afraid of pubic speaking. If that’s you, you’re in good company, because so was Moses. He initially didn’t think he could do what God had asked him to do because he was too afraid to actually go do it.

**Exodus 4:13 ESV — 13** But he said, “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.”

Moses was simply afraid to do what God had asked him to do.

In John 3 we see a man named Nicodemus who wasn’t just afraid of doing what God called him to do. He was afraid to even be known as someone who followed Jesus.

**John 3:1–2 ESV — 1** Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. **2** This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

Nicodemus was afraid to challenge the status quo. He was afraid to follow Jesus into an area he didn’t know or understand. He was afraid for his peers to know that he was coming to Jesus to talk with him, so he came at night, so no one would know.

How do we respond in fear? We don’t share our faith because it might make things awkward. We don’t stand up for truth because it might ruffle feathers. Sometimes we’re afraid to even let it be known that we follow Jesus because we’re afraid of what might come of it.

When we let fear take control it can be paralyzing. It can keep us from doing things that we would normally do because we get caught up in the unknowns or the risks involved. I had a friend in high school whose parents let her drive on the condition that she always wear a bicycle helmet while she was driving. She had to wear a helmet while driving a minivan until she was 18.

I knew another family where the mother would not let her 23 year old kid who still lived with her drive in the rain or the snow. Anytime there was any kind of weather, the mom took off from work to drive her kid to work first, then come back to her job.

Those aren’t normal behaviors. That’s living in fear of anything that could possibly happen. Trying to avoid all risk and all danger, always living in that kind of fear, makes us lose the peace that ought to be a characteristic part of our lives as followers of Jesus.

When we respond to God in fear, it also paralyzes us. We can’t follow God or do what he asks of us because in our mind the risks that we would have to take outweigh the rewards of following Jesus. That’s a lie that Satan uses to keep us at bay, to keep us from being effective in the Kingdom of God.

When both Moses and Nicodemus overcame their fears, they became faithful followers of God. In the end, Moses ended up being one of the strongest leaders Israel ever had. He was held up as the standard of leadership from that point forward.

Nicodemus became more and more bold as he learned to follow Jesus more faithfully. The more he learned to put away his fear and trust in Jesus, the more he became a public figure of the Christian faith. In John 7 we see Nicodemus stand up for Jesus among the Pharisees who wanted to condemn Jesus without so much as a trial. He was ridiculed for doing so, but he didn’t let the fear of that keep him from taking a stand.

The next time we see Nicodemus is after the crucifixion of Jesus. He and another man who had also been a secret follower of Jesus’ asked to be given the body of Jesus to prepare and bury in a tomb. These two men who had been afraid to let people know they followed Jesus went and publicly asked Pilate for his body, clearly marking themselves in the public eye as his disciples. If we want to follow Jesus well, we have to overcome our fears and respond to God in faith.

We can also respond to God in faith. For all the people we see fail to follow Jesus well in Scripture, we see many who follow him very well. Hebrews 11 is a collection of many of those people who followed Jesus well and responded to God in faith. They believe that God would do what he said he would do. Today I want to look at just two examples for the sake of time of people whose response to God in faith has always astounded me.

The first is Mary, the mother of Jesus. When Mary was just a young teenage girl who had never even been married, she got a visit from the angel Gabriel. This is what he said to her:

**Luke 1:30–35, 37 ESV — 30** ...“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. **31** And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. **32** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, **33** and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” **34** And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” **35** And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God... **37** For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Can you imagine being told something like that at the age of 14 or 15, maybe even younger? The weight of being the one to bear the Son of God and raise him in the world had to be enormous. The implications of that today would be huge, but the culture that Mary was born into made it even more of a struggle.

The fact that she was going to be pregnant and wasn’t married yet meant that she would be looked down upon and ostracized from her community. Had God not intervened in Joseph’s life, he would have divorced Mary because of the pregnancy. Mary had to know all those things were probably going to happen. She no doubt had seen others who had gone through unwed pregnancies before her.

You would think that Mary’s response would be like Moses’. You would think she would object to what was about to happen. Mary’s life was about to be turned upside down. It was going to look nothing like what she had planned. Despite all of that, this is how we see her respond:

**Luke 1:38 ESV — 38** And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

That word servant is the Greek word δουλος (doulos) which means slave. She was declaring herself to be under the ownership of God, committed to doing whatever he directed her to do no matter what the consequences. That’s what it looks like to respond to God in faith.

The other group of people I want to look at are the disciples of Jesus. These were young men who had grown up in a fishing community, and if you had asked them they probably planned to spend their entire life right there on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, doing exactly what their fathers and grandfathers had done before them.

This was a family business. They were busy learning the fishing trade from their fathers just as their fathers had learned from their fathers before them. These guys were expected to take on the mantle, to go into the family trade and continue the legacy. But then Jesus came along.

**Matthew 4:18–22 ESV — 18** While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. **19** And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” **20** Immediately they left their nets and followed him. **21** And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. **22** Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

These men, and all the other disciples, left behind all that they knew to follow Jesus. They left the trade they had learned since they were young. They left their equipment that did not come cheap. They left their families behind to continue the fishing trade without them.

There were no complaints, no questions, no bargaining. They didn’t run the numbers to make sure that their family business would be okay without them. It may not have been the best business practice, but it was incredible faith. Jesus called them, so they left immediately, no questions asked. That’s what it looks like to respond to God in faith.

So how do we make sure that don’t respond to God in pride or fear, but that we respond to him in faith instead?

1. Overcome our pride with humility

James (4.6) and Peter (1 Peter 5.5) both tell us that **James 4:6 ESV — 6** “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” That’s because the proud always put themselves before God. They respond to God in pride and put themselves in the place that only God deserves.

The antidote to the poison of pride is humility. Humility requires us to put others before ourselves. In our relationship with God, it requires us putting God and his will for our lives above our own wills and desires. We have to recognize our position before God and make sure we are giving him the proper place in our lives. God should be the most important thing in our lives. Anything less and we are in danger or responding to God in pride.

1. Overcome our fear with trust

When we fear what might happen or fear that God might not come through what we are really trying to do is control the situations we face in our lives. We want to make sure that we have everything well in hand. We don’t want to have to rely on God because that can be scary.

I had a lot of trouble trusting that God would come through and provide for me and my family at first. For me to learn to trust God it took multiple experiences of God providing exactly what we needed when that would be the only way that we could make things work. If we’re going to overcome our fear we have to trust that God will take care of us and that he will provide.

1. Unconditionally surrender to God

Imagine for a moment if in 1865 at Appomattox courthouse General Lee had said that he would surrender to Ulysses S. Grant on the condition that they still be able to keep slaves in the South. Not much of a surrender, right?

What if Germany had surrendered to the Allied forces on the condition that they got to keep Poland for themselves? Those examples seem pretty ridiculous, because that’s not how surrender works. If a surrender is not unconditional, if you’re still holding on to something that needs to be given up, then you’re not really surrendering.

The example of a war is actually very fitting. We are in a war with our human nature and with the evil one to follow after God. Our natural inclination is to hold onto the things that we ought to be letting go of. We tend to fight God to keep control. I often imagine that to God we probably sound like the little toddler who keeps yelling, “I will do it on my own.” But that’s not how surrendering to God works.

If we want to really respond to God in faith, we have to make sure that we have fully surrendered everything in our lives that needs to be given over to God. Hanging on to anything that we ought to be surrendering to God usually ends up in us responding to God in either pride or fear.

If we can come before God in humility, trust in him to provide and be in control, and fully surrender to him, then we can respond to God with the kind of faith that Mary had when she fully surrendered herself to God as his servant. The kind of faith the disciples had when they left all they knew behind to follow after Jesus. God did incredible things through Mary and the disciples. God can do incredible things through us as well if only we will respond to him in faith.