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Article of the Month
August, 2018

Good Fear

In August of 2016, the article of the month was on "Fear." It concentrated on improper fear — although it did mention the "good fear" which is the subject of this article. There will be some overlap, but it seemed appropriate to have an item which concentrates solely on the kind of fear which the Bible encourages.

VISCERAL FEELINGS

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the kind of physical-emotional reactions most of us have experienced at some time. When we have developed a great respect or a profound love for someone or some group, and then we have quite unintentionally said or done something which we know has hurt them, we feel in ourselves (as what we might call a "gut reaction") this terrifying disappointment in ourselves. Because our feelings for this person are so intense and real, we cannot bear to think that we could hurt him. THAT is the fear that the Bible classifies as a good fear — a fear that we could harm the very thing or person that we would least wish to harm.

Fear is not a bad word for this feeling. If our feelings toward that person are sincere, "fear" that we might alienate him is just that: FEAR. No doubt we could find some appropriate synonyms for the word. Some translations substitute "reverence." It is not a poor choice of word; but it does not convey the visceral disappointment that we experience. We could use "apprehension." That might come closer. Whatever words we might chose, we all know that we want to understand this word in its Scriptural usage, and we want to be certain that it is, or that it becomes, a part of our Christian character.

SOME OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

In this article of the month we will use the King James version of the Bible — probably yet the most extensively used English translation in the world.

In Deuteronomy 31:12 and 13, God is giving instructions to Joshua just as Israel was entering the promised land. God wanted the Law read aloud to all Israel, including the strangers with them. He had a three-fold learning process in mind: (1) hear; (2) learn; and (3) fear God. The lesson we want to get is that God expresses Himself through His written word. If we hear it and learn from it, the result will be such an intense love for God that we will have that gut-wrenching disappointment in ourselves if we disappoint Him.

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In Leviticus 19:3 is a part of that Law which states that everyone was to fear his mother and his father. The meaning remains the same. God is not inculcating terror on the part of children. He is inculcating that their love and respect for their parents be so very strong that it should hurt physically or emotionally (that internal tension) to demonstrate anything to parents that would hurt them.

Leviticus 19:14 shows a societal application of the concept. It says, "Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but thou shalt fear thy God." First of all, it shows that our behavior toward others demonstrates our respect or lack of respect for God. Secondly it shows that taking advantage of the weaknesses inherent in others shows a character deficiency that may make respect impossible for us. This is a matter for self-evaluation.

Proverbs 1:7 is the classic text on the subject: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." The thought is evident. If we do not have respect for the Giver of laws, there is no way that we can build a superstructure of good information for our own character development. Proverbs 9:10 is nearly the same except that it substitutes "wisdom" for "knowledge." Wisdom is the APPLICATION of knowledge. Thus, without the great respect in us which is DUE to our God, we can not have useful information OR useful application of information. How important is this proper fear!

According to Proverbs 10:27, the possession of this good fear is actually a life-extender!

Our last Old Testament text for this survey is Proverbs 8:13. It is an important text because it defines some of the character traits which exhibit that we DO have this proper fear. If we have it, we will have an active hatred of evil. We will find pride abhorrent. We will have an active aversion to arrogance. We will find "the froward mouth" something that drives us away.

SOME NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

Jesus uses the TWO definitions of fear in Matthew 10:28:

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.

-the word in the KJV is "hell." But the Greek word is Gehenna -NOT the usual word for hell which is "hades." Gehenna is a reference to the city incinerator-valley for Jerusalem. It is symbolically used throughout the New Testament to represent "second death" — the death from which there is no awakening or resurrection.

Even though Jesus uses "fear" twice in this verse, and even though both times it is the same Greek word (from which we get "phobia"), Jesus means two different kinds of fear by his words. The first use means "terror" — fear in the paralyzing sense. "Do not have any terror of people

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who can take away your life, but cannot take away your being (which God will restore in the resurrection)." But, as Jesus continues, he admonishes that wonderful reverence which never wants to displease God: "Instead of having the terror of men who can only take away this temporary life, Fear God — watch that you have no occasion of hurting Him whom you love passionately. If you do not gain that beautiful reverence, you will never have a character worth preserving, and God then will have the power and reason to consign you to eternal oblivion."

The two kinds of fear are so beautifully contrasted in this Matthew text.

In II Corinthians 7:10 and 11, the Apostle is describing "Godly sorrow." He is talking about how we want to repent of foolish things we have done. This kind of desire for repentance shows that we respect ("fear") a higher law than self — that we don't want to displease God or any human being worthy of respect. In verse 11, Paul gives a list of things we find happening in self when our attitude of repentance is correct. One part of his list is that true sorrow works "fear" in us. It brings us back to the proper relationship with both God and with mankind — a love that doesn't want to offend. Paul says that regaining this "fear" shows us that "In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter."

Ephesians 5:21 is in a context of submission. Paul shows submission to each other in the Christian fellowship. He shows submission in the marriage arrangement. And he shows that submission is a function of fearing God. If we have respect for the standards of God, our behaviors toward one another will not be domineering, but willfully and happily submissive. There is a protocol in the universe which has everyone in need of "giving in" to the higher needs of the group and of others. Only the "fear" (the ultimate love) of God will eventuate in this condition.

Ephesians 6:5-7 expands on the concept. It is talking about how indentured servants should have this good fear toward their masters in the flesh. He says "be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling." We might be tempted to think that Paul means terror when he uses the word "trembling." But that is not his thought. He is yet within the bounds of our definition of good fear. We have already defined it as having an internal, gut-wrenching reaction in us. Paul is emphasizing that definition. We should feel an internal "trembling" when we hurt those we love and respect. Paul also brings the matter back to the Old Testament concept under the Law. If you don't have this fear for God, you won't exercise it toward men.

In Philippians 2:12 Paul again uses "fear and trembling" with the exact intent he spoke of in Ephesians. We are to work on our part in our own salvation with that fervent internal fear and trembling that shows that we don't want to disappoint our Lord. This is never a bad fear, only a good one. There is nothing quite so powerful as love; and love will always fear to hurt another.

The Apostle Peter (I Peter 3:15) admonishes the same attitude. In this verse he relates good fear to our efforts at witnessing to others about how gracious the Lord's plan is. He says that we must

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give answers and reasons toward the inquisitive with "meekness and fear." We are never to lord it over our hearers with a superiority attitude. We must demonstrate that we are teachable (meek), and that we have that all-pervading "fear" — the attitude that would never harm.

Finally, we have in Revelation 15:4 the wonderful prophecy that this good fear will be the inheritance eventually for all nations once they have come to realize what a glorious God we all have.

As we see many places in Scripture the words "Fear not!" begin the announcements of good things, may it be our privilege to "fear not" because we do have that good fear.
