

### Effective Fear

Very likely, most of you who read this have vivid memories of the fear created by preachers to whom you listened before you obeyed the gospel. They displayed life and death frightfully before you, calling upon you to make the choice for life before it was everlastingly too late. If you were not prepared to die that night, and having no promise of tomorrow, you should accept the salvation the Lord offered through the gospel that very hour. Paul could be quoted as pleading, “Knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Cor. 5:11) and the congregation might have added to the emotion by singing “Almost Persuaded.”

In the last twenty years that emotional and compelling scene has changed greatly. The technique of the evangelist has changed in an effort to motivate the sinner by love rather than by fear. Upon learning what God has done for him through Christ, the response should be an expression of love. Because he loves the Lord, he obeys. One’s obedience becomes a “thank you” for what God has already done for her rather than a fearful flight to God to escape the consequences of her sin.

That would aim to lift obedience to a higher plane. The concept is high and holy. In retrospect after years have passed, the disciples may speak and sing extravagant expressions of that love and affection which led them to obey.

Now, let me shake you into reality. It is time to leave the fanciful dreaming and be honest with ourselves. At the time when you committed your life to Christ through obedience to the gospel, were you doing it to express love to God or to escape the eternal consequences of your sin? I suspect that most all of you will admit that the love aspect entered the scene after the fact. You knew Paul’s warning that Jesus would come “with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thes. 1:7f).

Avoidance of that fearful fate in hell was your compelling motivation.

Do not bash yourself as you review the effect of fear in your decision. You may identify with most of the rest of us. The “good news” becomes the more welcomed news after we have been convinced that we are doomed by our guilt. If you have no consciousness of being lost, you will feel no need of being found. If you do not consider yourself in peril, you will seek no rescue.

John the Baptist preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Many of the Jews “were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” “When he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’” Without repentance, they would be the chaff that Jesus would burn up with

unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:1-12). That stern preacher made no mention of the motivation of love.

Later, “Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,’” taking up the theme of his forerunner (Matt. 4:17). “Repent or perish” was the choice he gave disobedient listeners (Luke 13:3, 5). Repeatedly in his ministry, he warned the disobedient of hell as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Scary, I’d say!

The message the rejecting Jews heard from Peter on Pentecost was not exactly comforting to them. Being cut to the heart by what they heard, and feeling totally doomed, they cried out in desperation concerning their state. Peter gave them no discourse on the response of love, but told them how to escape their dire fate by accepting God’s offer of forgiveness through their repentance and baptism, even as John and Jesus had preached.

Would you be scared by being blinded by lightning and deafened by a thunderbolt? Saul must have been terrified by his experience on the road to Damascus. It brought from him a desperate cry to the Lord and induced such trauma that he neither ate nor drank for three days and nights which he spent in prayer (Acts 9, 22, 26).

When the jailer in Philippi heard the commotion and thought his prisoners had escaped, he started to take his life. Paul dissuaded him with assurance that none had escaped. “And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, ‘Men, what must I do to be saved?’” Paul told him to believe in Jesus, then taught him the word of the Lord and baptized him at that midnight hour, which was followed by rejoicing (Acts 16:25-34).

While it is true that a person in desperate circumstances will have appreciation for the means of rescue offered immediately, a personal feeling of devotion to the rescuers will only develop with time and understanding. The more immediate motivation is fear and desire to escape.

You who have read my material know that I have taught emphatically that love must be the motive for acceptable service to God. Am I now changing my viewpoint? Not really. I am making a distinction, however, between the accepting of God’s grace and living in response to it, between our obedience to the gospel and our keeping the commandments relating to the life of a disciple. In our flight from sin and its fearful consequences, we are baptized into a relationship with God in Christ through which we receive his grace. Then, in appreciation for the grace received, we live dedicated lives seeking to honor him through loving service. Like Noah, being motivated by godly fear, built the ark, so we work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (Heb. 11:7; Phil. 2:12).

God's commands are for us to love him and one another. Anything that we interpret as a law, rule, principle of action, command, or instruction is fulfilled by love. These direct us in ways to demonstrate love. So love keeps his commandments, for whoever loves him does those things. These directions from God are not a code of law, an enumeration of duties, or a description of rituals to be performed. Love sees human need and reaches out to it. When disciples serve human needs, they are serving the Lord. He has no needs.

Since none of us can boast of demonstrating ultimate love in our daily lives, there must always be a conscious concern. We must daily question our use of time, money, and abilities as to whether we are too selfish. This constant appraisal should not produce fear but maturity in judgment and devotion. Paul explained that Roman disciples did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear but that they had received the higher spirit of sonship (Rom. 8:15).

John, in the fourth chapter of his first epistle, has many comforting things to say about love, such as: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love." As we daily give ourselves in loving commitment to God as a response to his love, we can and should live without dread or fear. You know the texts that teach that without my listing them here.

This comfort with God comes, however, not by dismissing further accountability to him. Paul's own expression was, "I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:27).

The disciple is constantly reminded by the Spirit, "For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt" (Heb. 6:4-6). The disciple who deliberately denies Christ rejects his offering of atonement and, hence, rejects forgiveness. He should fear greatly for "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:26-31).

Yes, there is place for fear. The effectiveness of fear will become outdated only when sin is outdated. Conviction of sins brings fear which should motivate one to seek God. And whoever is forgiven most loves most and whoever is forgiven little loves little (Luke 7:36-47). [] (November 2000).

