

PASTOR'S NOTES. Fear and an Angry God, Part 1

*When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die."*

*Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of Him upon you so that you do not sin."* (Exodus 20:18-20, NRSV)

This passage is from the time in Israel's history when they first come to Mount Sinai, and they hear the voice of God telling them the Ten Commandments.

If you are a person like me who grew up going to Sunday School, you probably had some time where a teacher explained to you what it means to FEAR GOD. In my class the teacher told us that this did not mean that we were to be afraid that God would hurt us, but that we were to respect God.

I'm not sure that was the best way to answer the question. I suppose it is better than being told that God is looking at you in anger, expecting you to mess up, and wants an excuse to hurt you, so you better watch out. I can think of at least one person for whom I think that was the message he received growing up, whether or not it was actually said. His own description of his parents made them sound very harsh. And it kept him in line - he was a high-achieving child who never got in trouble. But he also tended to be a rather judgmental adult and I suspect that his high-achieving children felt they had to be good to earn his conditional love.

But though as a child I never questioned the idea that fearing God means respecting Him, I never forgot it either, maybe because I later wondered if that really got at the heart of the matter. After all, if that's what we mean by fearing God, why not simply say "respecting God?" Why use the word 'fear' in the first place, except that we are supposed to be afraid?

I would guess that most Christians were taught to fear God like my friend. After all, if you take a Bible concordance and look up "fear," you would find hundreds of passages referring to fearing God. We are commanded to fear God in Leviticus 19 & 25, and in Deuteronomy 4, 5, 6, 10, 13, 14, 17. If you were look at the more than a hundred passages that talk about God's wrath, it certainly seems that we should be afraid because God is angry. I have to wonder, was my Sunday School teacher just trying to be nice and not frighten us? Isn't it more honest to just admit that we have an angry God who is quite willing to hurt us if we mess up?

*"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear Him Who can destroy both soul and body in hell."* (Matthew 10:28, NRSV)

Those are words of Jesus Himself right there. I capitalize the Him because it certainly must be referring to God - no one else can destroy both body and soul. If I read this verse by itself, it sounds like Jesus wants us to be afraid of God. But if we read the verses before and after, it sounds like it is more about us NOT being afraid, but to trust in Him. In the verses of Exodus 20 at the beginning of this article, Moses likewise is trying to get the people to trust and not be afraid. Consider all the times that God speaks directly or through an angel and begins with "Fear not" (such as Luke 1:30 and 2:10 of the Christmas story).

I realize that my current position on this matter of fearing God is probably very different than what most of you have come to believe. I am convinced that God does not want or intend to hurt us, but I disagree with the idea that we have nothing to fear. You won't hear me talk about God sending people to hell, but you will hear me insist that there is a hell. And while some will dismiss the idea of the fear of God as primitive and irrelevant in our modern world, I believe that the ancients have plenty to teach us that we have lost.

So I further realize that it will take more than one article to explain this. I need to talk about three things: 1- what fear is for us, 2- how we understand God, 3- what God's anger or wrath actually means.

Since I still have a little space left, let me start by talking about fear. I mentioned in the last article how I have come to see four basic emotions: mad, sad, glad, and scared; at least today this makes sense to me. Fear is one of these base emotions, and while we often talk bad about it, we should recognize that it has been for us a major reason for our survival.

Fear is our perception of danger. For many animals and humans, when we sense that there may be a threat near us, our senses are heightened. We feel a surge of adrenalin that will allow us to move faster, our focus narrows, and the higher thought processes in our brain shut down. Our possible responses are to stay paralyzed, or to flee, or to fight. The first will definitely lead to capture and/or death, but the other two make it possible to survive. And our body is tuned to focus all our energy on the fight or flight that we have chosen. In the animal kingdom this has allowed their survival. Once the danger is past, the body re-orientes itself back to its normal state.

Notice that we humans often think of fear as running away, and we call fighters fearless, but the reality is that usually we fight because of our fear. This might sound strange to men who assume that we fight out of anger, but men have been raised to mask their fear with anger – it is the fear that enures our survival. I have pondered about some of the great military leaders of the past, including David in the Bible, and I wonder if part of their success was because they were in touch with their emotions. They recognized their fear and made use of it. They knew there was a time to retreat and a time to go forward. Anyway, that is a whole other topic for another day.

For humans, fear can also be unhealthy. We can imagine danger and obsess about it for long periods of time, not allowing our body to release the stress. No animal has fears about being late for work, missing deadlines, being embarrassed, or getting killed in a video game. We humans alone have this feature, and it contributes to high blood pressure, heart attacks, strokes, and other health issues. So I think it is probably clear that having fear is useful, but living in fear is hazardous to our health and those around us.

In the next article, I will say a little more about fear in its other forms, and then about how this relates to God. In the meantime, I pray for all of us that we recognize our fear so as to use it constructively and we can move away from living in it.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive style.