

FEAR -- PRELUDE TO GREATNESS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 18, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Of all the emotions known to man, none is more common than that of fear. Along with love, hate, joy and the other basic emotions, it is universally known. Fear has been common in every age of man's history and in every stage of man's development. No one is exempt.

Since fear is so widespread, perhaps we should ask, "What is fear?" Webster defines fear as "Painful emotion marked by alarm; dread; disquiet; anxious concern; solicitude." It also includes feelings of uncertainty, lack of self-assurance, and need of help. The general reaction to fear is negative, for men universally consider fear undesirable and evil.

God Equipped Man to Feel Fear--Why?

If fear is undesirable, why then did God make man in such a way that it was inevitable that he should feel fear? Why does fear have so large a place in the existence of mankind? All of us have known fear many times in our lives. The child is afraid of the dark; the elderly person is afraid of insecurity. In between these extremes of life there are many other fears: the loss of possessions, the loss of loved ones, sickness, death, and myriads more. Fears are of many kinds, but always they are present.

Just here perhaps it will serve our purpose to speak of a very common kind of fear, which is known among those who would become public speakers. It is usually called stage-fright. Years ago I read the explanation given in the speech textbooks. When a person stands before an audience, where the experience is new and frightening, the adrenal glands exude adrenalin into the blood stream. It is very much like putting high octane gasoline into a car. The person then receives additional energy and is, in a sense, super-charged. Facing an emergency, his inborn defense mechanism goes into operation and provides him additional fuel to meet the situation. Since he cannot use this extra energy, it shows itself in trembling hands and wobbly knees. This is very similar to the situation one finds when a house catches on fire. In the extreme excitement of such an emergency a person often is able to carry out of the burning building pieces of furniture that he is unable to lift alone when later the fire has been extinguished and it is time to move the furniture back into the house. Under stress, the body provided extra strength for the emergency. In these instances, it is easy to see that fear serves a purpose,

Similarly, when a nation is in peril, its leaders shock the people into fear and thereby challenge them into preparedness. During the past two decades, our national leaders have made the threat of Communism very real to the American people, and this fear of what might happen has caused this nation to engage in all kinds of preparedness efforts. Again, fear is the means of bringing a nation to prepare itself for an emergency.

Similarly, again, a careless student, through the use of fear, may be led to do a much higher quality of work. For example, a lackadaisical boy whose grade reports shows a predominance of C's and A's and a sprinkling of F's, may be led to change these grades into A's and B's by a very simple experience. If one of his teachers should call him into the office, point out very realistically that low grades will prevent his getting the jobs he wants after college, and that they may even cause him to be dropped from school, the boy through fear may then find that he is not so allergic to textbooks and to study as he had thought. Fear often serves a purpose in causing man to work harder than he has previously worked. Fear, upon careful examination, often serves a good purpose.

Biblical Cases of Fear

Having introduced the idea that fear is not an undesirable emotional feeling, I would like to point out that in the Bible feelings of fear have often been a prelude to greatness. In a surprisingly large number of cases, feelings of fear preceded the most important events in the lives of some of God's most useful servants. For example, in Luke 5, the opening paragraph tells of Jesus walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. At one point we are told that "he sat down and taught the multitudes out of the boat. And when he had left speaking, he said unto Simon, Put out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught. And Simon answered and said, Master, we toiled all night and took nothing: but at thy word I will let down the nets. And when they had done this, they enclosed a great multitude of fishes; and their nets were breaking; and they beckoned unto their partners in the other boat, that they should come and help them. And they came, and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink." Remember that these men were fishermen and that a catch of fish such as this was the dream of a lifetime. We can almost see them as they pulled in their nets with eagerness, then suddenly we read, "But Simon Peter, when he saw it, fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Suddenly Peter realized that something more important than fishing was happening. Fear overwhelmed him and he wanted to run, but you cannot run on a boat. Instead, he fell down before Jesus and said, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord." "And Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men. And when they had brought their boats to land, they left all, and followed him." (Luke 5:3-11). Peter's fear immediately preceded the most important turn in his life. From this point on he was a follower of Jesus, an apostle of the Lord.

Earlier in this same gospel according to Luke, we read, “Now in the month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee. But she was greatly troubled at the saying and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this might be. The angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God.” (Luke 1:26-30). The most important thing that ever happened to a woman was about to take place--the virgin birth of the Messiah, and the announcement brought fear to the heart of this Jewish maiden.

Old Testament Examples

The Old Testament book of Esther tells the story of King Ahasuerus and his decree that all of the Jews should be killed. At this point Mordecia called upon Esther the queen to go in and beseech the king’s mercy for her people, the Jews. Esther was afraid, because to go before the king unbidden meant death, unless the king should raise his scepter in part. Mordecia insisted with the words, “Who knowest whether thou art not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” Esther conquered her fear and said, “So will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.” (Esther 4:14-16). Her finest hour was preceded by these feelings of fear.

Still another example is that of Moses as God called him to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage. In Exodus, chapters three and four, we read of Moses in the backside of the wilderness, as he tended flocks in Midian. God appeared to him in a burning bush and the scripture says, “And Moses hid his face: for he was afraid to look upon God.” (Ex. 3:6). Then Moses made excuses, “Who am I, that I should go?” “They shall say to me, What is his name? What shall I say unto them?” “They will not believe me.” “I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.” Finally, God overcame all of these excuses and Moses went to lead the Israelites to freedom. Again, fear preceded the most important events in the life of one of God’s servants.

As we push further back into the Old Testament we find that Noah also felt fear. According to Hebrews 11:7, “By faith Noah, being warned of God concerning things not seen as yet, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house.” There are many other examples where fear was a prelude to greatness but these will suffice.

New Testament Examples

In the book of Acts, we read of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. This brilliant young Jewish lawyer, who had studied at the feet of Gamaliel in Jerusalem, felt a supreme confidence in himself, his ability and his training. He had letters from the High Priest in his pocket, giving him the right to arrest Christians in Damascus and return them to Jerusalem for trial. There is no fear in his makeup. Then, suddenly, a bright light shown about him as he walked along the Damascus road. For the first time in his life he came to realize that Jesus was the Messiah. He fell to the ground, was blinded, and confessed his Lord. Then, he was led by his companions into Damascus, where in blindness, he spent three days in fasting and prayer. Out of these fear-filled days, he emerged to become a Christian and an apostle of Jesus Christ. The stubborn heart of this brilliant young Jewish lawyer was melted by fear.

The sixteenth chapter of Acts finds another story in which fear plays an important role. A Philippian jailor, one of the most least likely prospects for the gospel that could be found anywhere, begs for instructions in how to become a Christian. However, his desire does not come until he has felt fear. The story is familiar. Paul and Silas were in prison at midnight, when suddenly the building was shaken and the foundations broken open. As the jailor is about to destroy himself, “Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm, for we are all here. And he called for lights and sprang in, and, trembling for fear, fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:28-29). Paul and Silas preached unto him the gospel and the story closes with his accepting and obeying the gospel of Christ, together with all his household. Had these same gospel preachers tried to preach the gospel to the Philippian jailor on the previous evening, he would have responded by a violent rejection of their appeal. However, when his heart had been softened by fear, the gospel had a chance.

Conclusion

When we ask ourselves the question, “Why did God equip man to feel fear?” we are led to see that fear with its accompanying realization that man himself is inadequate and weak, paves the way for man to lift his eyes toward heaven and to accept God. Fear can and does serve a very good purpose. Salvation today often comes when man realizes how weak and powerless he is to cope with life’s problems. Out of fear, as he faces the issues of life and death, many a man has been brought to Christ.

Finally, I should like to mention one more passage of scripture. “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear.” (I John 4:18). Fear serves the vitally important role of making man realize his own inadequacy and the need to trust in God. Fear brings the immature Christian back to God again and again. Finally, as the Christian grows in his faith and trust in God, there comes a time when this perfect love casts out fear. The mature Christian so completely trusts in God’s power that he no longer needs fear. Fear serves to bring man to God, but ultimately God’s love for man and man’s love for God casts out fear.