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Fear, the Beginning of Wisdom—Part 2

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7).

Man likes to believe he is adequate. He believes himself to be satisfactory and acceptable in quality—and his “goodness” is sufficient in its quantity to merit approval.

But we can only feel this way by comparing ourselves to the fallen creation. Our first measure of adequacy is to appraise ourselves in the presence of other flawed human beings. And as there is always someone worse in character and behavior than us, we will always feel “better” than someone and this is how we feel adequate, because we are not “them.” And if we can’t find anyone worse, we compare ourselves to animals (evolution) and feel “better” about ourselves measuring up that way.

But this relativistic calculation is not an objective measure. If man is measured against an objective measure of good, he is found to be objectively inadequate. And if man is forced to face this objective reality, it produces fear.

The Greek word for fear is “phobes,” which means “to flee or withdraw.” When the wicked are faced with objective good, they experience “the desire to flee or withdraw—an emotion “caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous to them and is likely to cause them pain—as a threat.” And well they should feel this way because God is the objective good that they are measured against, and all who do evil are His enemies whom He has sworn vengeance upon for all the harm they have committed (Rom. 12:19). These are the unrepentant—shrinking back from Him to destruction, having withdrawn from God as their enemy. “*Arise, O Lord, do not let man prevail; Let the nations be judged before You. Put them in fear, O Lord; Let the nations know that they are but men. Selah*” (Ps. 9:19-20). “*He will cut off the spirit of princes; He is feared by the kings of the earth*” (Ps. 76:12).

But the Scriptures tell us that even Believers are to fear God. In this context, the fear is a desire to withdraw from the presence of God because we are inadequate. This is the “fear” Isaiah felt in the presence of God because he knew he didn’t belong there: “*Then I said, ‘Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts’*” (Is. 6:5). Isaiah saw himself as he was—wholly inadequate—ruined by his sin and unworthy to be in God’s all-sufficient presence. Our fallen flesh must feel the dread of God’s holiness, so our flesh should tremble in the fear of its inadequacy.

Isaiah’s confession is the fundamental essence behind “reverence,” just as Ezekiel, Daniel, and John all fell down as if they were dead in the presence of God, or even His angel. Knowing you are inadequate in God’s presence, and confessing it, is the fear of the Lord. It is to take Him seriously, to take Him at His Word. To fear the Lord is to understand His character in your heart—to recognize that you are separate from Him—that His ways are not your ways. This is the beginning of wisdom.

This is not a fear that makes a repentant sinner retreat from God, but to know they have no right to approach Him—yet, He has called them, welcomed them, and offered them refuge in His adequacy. This fear of the Lord is not to see God as a threat or danger, for “*you who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield*” (Ps. 115:11). You cannot entrust yourself to someone you fear will harm you, for “*there is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love*” (1 Jn. 4:18).

The fear that acknowledges God’s holiness and sufficiency—and our unholiness and insufficient nature—is the beginning of wisdom. It is what leads a sinner to Salvation and is necessary before someone can confess the name of Christ in faith. And it is what keep the hearts and minds of Believers fixed on God. Amen.

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