

## **The Role Fear Plays In Our Relationship WithThe Lord**

Most people would agree, I think, that fear stands as one of the dominant features of human life and and experience. One guesses those people are rare who feel themselves untroubled by fears of one sort or another; and indeed, we might seriously question whether there are any who are so placed that they know no fear at all. Rather the impression is that fear of one sort or another, is common to us all.

People fear for the future. Some dread an atomic war. I have known folk who were frightened when it came to meeting new people, and others when they were called upon to make a speech. Most of us fear dark and lonely places, and there are those who inwardly torment themselves with thoughts of a burdensome old age and with the prospect of death, the purposes of which, unhappily enough, so few understand.

Also there are times when a person will do or say something because they are frightened of losing face. They fear for the regard of people, for what other people will think and say about them. We know fear as children and we know fear as adults, and what particularly interests me is the teaching concerning fear in the context of our relationship with the Lord.

Quite apart from what is said elsewhere, in the Psalms alone fear is mentioned as many as fifty times in this connection, in sometimes familiar and long remembered utterances.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do His commandments." (Psalm 111, verse 10).

"Blessed is the man that fears the Lord, that delights greatly in His commandments." (Psalm 112, verse 1).

"Let all the earth fear the Lord: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him." (Psalm 33, verse 8).

And so it goes on. Since there are these statements on the subject we are bound to ask what part fear can and should play and why it is emphasised in this way.

But first of all, what is fear? And can we adequately define it? Indeed, we can. Fear is that which protects the things we love most of all in life. Inevitably therefore it will manifest itself in our lives according to the nature of the things which are loved.

For example, if people love wealth and status and set their hearts upon them, they are going to fear eventualities and happenings which are likely to affect these things. They will fear a change in the economic climate or uncertain fluctuations on the stock market.

Fear is the way in which love protects itself. Fear is what comes to the aid of love, or to the aid of something we love, when it is threatened in any way. Fear is that which prompts us so to protect what we love. And the fact is that no one can escape fear for every person loves something, and where there is love there is fear, whether it is a love of wealth, a love of status, or a love of self, a love of life, a love of sport, a love of others, or whatever. Fear is the protector of love.

But I go back to the question I raised earlier, what of fear in regard to our spiritual welfare and our relationship with the Lord? The Lord knows our fears and in our unregenerate states He uses them and appeals to them as the means of restraining us from indulging the inclinations and tendencies which we would otherwise love to do. We may cherish the worst evils imaginable, yet we restrain ourselves because we know that they constitute unacceptable behaviour and we bring to mind the consequences we fear should they be committed.

As I say, the Lord appeals to such fears within us to prevent us doing what by nature and inclination we would otherwise tend to do. Admittedly it is a negative thing to have to appeal to fear, yet it is both necessary and is a starting point. "The Lord", wrote Swedenborg, "heals the love of man's will first of all by means of fears". (*Divine Providence* 283). The path to eventual regeneration commences at this point.

Fear then is what causes us at first to shun our evils and to live what is outwardly an orderly and respectable life. We know very well that if we did cheat and lie and steal openly there would be social consequences which would prove totally intolerable. Everybody knows this and is acutely aware of it. And apart from social consequences, we bring to mind possible eternal consequences also. In the early stages most people, and if they have had any religious instruction at all, think of hell and are frightened of it as a possible consequence of something they may do.

And yet negative though an appeal to such fears may be, or appear to be, here is the starting point. Fear has this role to play. There is no doubt that our fears are used in this way. But we can be led onwards. Things don't have to remain always at that level. Having fallen into line, obeyed and done good, at first for fear of doing otherwise, the Lord strives to lead us on to find delight and happiness in the doing of good for its own sake. Though at first we obey the Commandments, for example, out of fear of the consequences to ourselves of doing otherwise, the Lord's intention is that we should in time come to obey them out of love and joy.

Reluctant though in the beginning our obedience may be, and only grudgingly given. Yet over a time we come to see the reason for such obedience and to find a delight and pleasure in it. This is how the Lord intends it to be. One thing leading on to another. Obedience out of fear of the consequences to ourselves leading on to obedience out of love.

A dread of consequences gradually changes into a love and joy in such obedience.

"All worship of God", we read, "must necessarily begin with holy fear within which is the thought that God will reward the good and punish the evil. The simple and little children must believe this, because they do not as yet understand what permission is. When at the beginning, one dares not do evil through fear, there is gradually implanted a new love of doing the thing because it is right and good in itself." (*Arcana Caelestia* 6071).

Is it then that fear disappears in the transformation and as progress is made? In one sense this is so. But the truth is that one type of fear is exchanged for another; the fear for ourselves and of consequences being laid on one side, and a fear for the Lord taking its place. Fear is there still, but it is of a totally different nature than it was earlier on. Indeed, what we must realise is that fear is of two kinds and both kinds have a role to play at different stages in the course of regeneration.

The more we come to know and love the Lord so a new and different kind of fear grows within us. It is not a fear in the sense that we are 'afraid' of Him. Rather is it a fear of whatever would harm or damage the relationship we have with Him. Swedenborg wrote of it:

"Holy fear is not so much fear of hell and damnation, but is an aversion to doing and thinking anything against the Lord and against the neighbour; thus it is an aversion to doing or thinking anything contrary to the good of love and the truth of faith." (*Arcana Caelestia* 2826).

It is not a matter of being afraid of the Lord for there is no reason whatsoever for this. What is spoken about is a fear which grows within a person as they regenerate; a fear of anything that would destroy the relationship they enjoy with Him. Again quoting Swedenborg:

"It should be known that holy fear is love, but such love as little children have towards their parents, and married partners towards each other, who fear to do anything which displeases, thus which in any way injures the love. Such a fear is insinuated into the love during regeneration; and as this fear is in agreement with love, and can be in it, and actually is in it or united to it, it is called holy fear, and is the fear of sinning, or acting contrary to the Commandments, thus against the Lord". ([Arcana Caelestia 8925](#)).

People who deeply love each other fear those things which would come between them and destroy their love. They are not 'afraid' of each other. They are afraid of other things which would enter in from outside. And so it is with our relationship with the Lord. If we genuinely love the Lord we shall fear anything which could destroy that love; we shall fear the suggestions of sin and the enticements of evil. And this is the holy fear in which He (that is, the Lord) would have us live.

"Teach me thy way, O Lord; I will walk in thy truth: unite my heart to fear thy name". (Psalm 86, verse 11.).

"Let all the earth fear the Lord: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him." (Psalm 33, verse 8).

We noted earlier that no one can escape fear. The thing is we all love something, whether it is ourselves, the world, the Lord or our neighbour and where there is love there is fear. Fear is the protector of love. According to the love which rules in our life so is the type or quality of the fear we have. The question therefore, is not one of erasing fear, but of changing its nature. If we are reforming and regenerating, our earlier fear of consequences will give way to a holy fear of anything that would damage the relationship we have and enjoy with the Lord and those around us.

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