

The Fear of Evil

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I will fear no evil. *Psalm 23:4*

Consider the meaning of these few words from the 23rd *Psalm*. They are words that carry a strong sense of confidence, a sense of power and a sense of deep peace. With the Lord, our heavenly Father, watching over us like a good shepherd what is there to fear? We are taught:

A person who trusts in the Lord is led into all the good loves and true ideas of heaven, and overflows with the enjoyments from them; “my shepherd” means the Lord; “the green pastures” mean a knowledge of truth and good; “the still waters” mean the truths of heaven that come from this knowledge; “table” means spiritual nourishment; “to anoint the head with oil” means wisdom from good loves; “my cup will overflow” means intelligence which comes from truths. (*Apocalypse Explained 375:34*)

Yet, too often, the confidence and peace that is spoken of through these words eludes us. In its place there can be many fears both large and small. People can be fearful about their future plans, hopes and dreams, fearful about the welfare of their marriage, their children, their job, or anything else that they hold dear in life. On a different level, they can be fearful of being inadequate, of appearing stupid, of being disliked, fearful of doing or saying things they would rather not. These fears affect the person’s thoughts and actions. They can prevent a person from living the sort of life that the Lord wants each of us to lead.

All of us have fears. We are afraid that many things might happen that would hurt us or those that we love or would hurt the causes that we have dedicated a part of our lives to. In a broad sense this fear is a fear of evil itself. Everyone tends to think of the things that they do not want to have happen as bad or evil. We fear the potential effects of all the bad things that we can imagine happening. Yes, we know what the fear of evil is. The wonder is that the most fearful of all are the evil spirits of hell. They are fearful because they have no one to protect them (*Arcana Caelestia 390e*).

“I will fear no evil.” These words carry the confidence of the Lord’s presence and protection. Our knowledge of the Lord and our understanding of how He cares for us can help us to achieve this sense of being protected. Psalm 23 states “Your rod and staff, they comfort me.” In the teachings for the New Church these words mean the comfort we can get from recognizing the power of Divine truth and good in our own lives (*Arcana Caelestia 4876*).

The Lord stands at the door and knocks. He promises to come into our lives as an invited guest to share our meal with us. People react quite differently to the Lord’s presence. Some hardly hear the Lord’s knock from fear. Some will not open the door from fear. They are afraid, afraid of bad news, of damnation. They are afraid of the Lord. What some people have learned of the Lord has made them fearful. Crippling fear is a stumbling block in some people’s worship of the Lord and their ability to follow Him. They are afraid like Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, afraid and perhaps trying to hide. They hear the Lord telling them that they have done wrong and will be

punished. They hear the Lord saying that because of what they have done, they have little chance of heaven. They have little chance of a happy marriage, now or forever. They hear the Lord telling them that they are horribly evil.

Fear is a strange thing. Sometimes it has us avoid thinking of something and other times it has us dwell in an unhealthy way on a subject. But who would say that they were afraid of the Lord? Imagine asking ten people on a busy street, "Are you afraid of God?" Quite possibly not one of the ten would say, "Yes." Some of the people might think that it is a strange question to be asking in the first place. Some might add, "Actually, I don't think about God very much," or "I'm much too busy trying to keep the rest of my life under control to think much about it" or "I'm not interested in the subject of religion." Don't think about God! Not interested in religion! What if you asked the same ten people if they would like to be happy? Would anyone say no?

The message of the real world should be very clear. Happiness does not come from the outside. Happiness does not come from mere human efforts at self-improvement. The order of the created universe should have us see that we need to think of happiness as something higher than mere natural pleasure. It comes from within rather from the correct external environment.

Perhaps those who tend not to think about the Lord need to see a new ray of hope in their lives. They need to see a glimmer of heaven as it really is. A ray of hope encouraging them to think about things that they might otherwise avoid. Hope that would help overcome the fears and preoccupations that keep them from turning to the Lord. Yes, fear can certainly lead one to avoid even hearing the Lord knocking at the door to come in.

And yet the simple fact is that the Lord loves us. If we look at the house of our mind and see a mess sometimes, we can try to remember that the Lord has forgiven us for the mess and actually wants to come help us clean it up. The fact is that the Lord condemns none of us. None of us? Yes, that is right, none of us. We have even heard that before.

The teachings for the New Church tell us that the more fear there is in worship, the less faith and still less love there is in it (*Arcana Caelestia* 2826:13). This kind of fear is a crippling fear. It keeps us from enjoying life and serving others happily. The teachings for the New Church also speak of another kind of fear, a holy fear that has a very different appearance from this crippling fear. It is not a fear of the Lord being angry with us and of punishing us, but rather it is a fear of hurting something we love. A fear of hurting the Lord, hurting our neighbor, doing harm to what is true and good. This fear does not cripple. Instead, it is like adrenaline in our blood, stimulating us to do better. Love without this kind of fear has little or no life.

There is a natural progression that the focus of fear can take in our life. At first, a person tends to think completely naturally and externally. His fears focus on whether he will be safe, whether he will have enough food, will life go well for him. There is a tendency to think, in this state of mind, that happiness in life is dependent on external things going the way we want them to. People have to treat us right; we need the right opportunities to be happy. We must protect ourselves very carefully from any external threat to ourselves, our loved ones, our belongings. For the person who has no significant religious faith, life is filled with potential pitfalls to be avoided. The focus of his fears is outside of himself, and the most frightening thing is that it is

mostly beyond his control as well. Given how much of life is out of our hands, a belief in an all-knowing, all-powerful God is an important step away from being run by fears of hundreds of things in this world.

For those who do have religious faith, but are still thinking naturally, the focus of their fears may be the fear of God, a fear of His anger and our possible damnation. He just hopes that he does the things that he should so that he does not bring punishment down on himself. Since all of us are aware that we have done many wrong things in the past and too often are acting far from perfectly now, there can be fear associated with our relationship to the Lord. Perfection is impossible to attain. By itself, infinite truth condemns all people to hell. And yet we need not be fearful. We need not fear an angry and vengeful God. As we learn what He is truly like, we are taught that He is never angry with us. Never. And He condemns no one. The Lord is our shepherd, leading us away from the actions, thoughts and concerns that will cause us nothing but trouble. We need not fear Him as a source of punishment. He tries to lead us away from evil.

When we come to acknowledge and believe that we need not fear the Lord, the next focus the fear of evil seems to take is the fear of the evil that seems to be a part of each of us. This fear can be a fear of ourselves. We are the mess that will keep us from receiving the life of heaven, it is hard to feel good about yourself when this fear exists in your mind. All we allow ourselves to see is the problems we have and the wrong that we do. This fear tends to weigh heavily on us, discouraging us, leaving us turned inward. But this is not the perspective we are to have on life. As we learn and come to truly acknowledge what the reality of our life is, this fear also will vanish. When you believe that all evil thoughts and loves come from hell, then you do not have to own them as something that is intrinsically you (*Arcana Caelestia* 6324). You can see evil as something separate. Something that, in itself, is outside you, seeking admission and acceptance. Something that you have a choice about.

The final focus of the fear of evil is a fear that the angels inspire in us. It is the fear of evil as something separate from us. A fear of the evil that seeks to harm us and those who we love. This fear is never a crippling fear. It is a fear that stimulates us to do better. It stimulates us to rout out every cunning means that the evil spirits try to use to get us to accept evil as our own.

So the focus of our fear of evil changes as we learn the nature of the Lord and His creation. At first we fear natural events that are beyond our control, then perhaps this is shifted to a fear of God Himself, and then we fear ourselves and finally come to fear evil as something separate from ourselves. And when that belief comes to guide our lives then crippling fear is gone and in its place there will be a holy fear. When crippling fear is taken away there is hope. Hope for the future. There is confidence in the Lord. Confidence that He is our Savior and Redeemer. There is hope for us. Why? Because we know that the Lord is our shepherd. He will never desert us, never! Why? Simply, -- because He loves us. AMEN

LESSONS: Psalm 23, Matthew 10:16-31, *Arcana Caelestia* 2826:13

Psalm 23 - A Psalm of David

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I
will fear no evil; For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Matthew 10:16-31

Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you. ²¹ Now brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father *his* child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes. A disciple is not above *his* teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more *will they call* those of his household! Therefore do not fear them. For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known.
Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

***Arcana Caelestia* 2826:13**

“The fear of God” means worship based either on fear, or on the good things that flow from faith, or on the good things that flow from love. But the more fear is present in worship the less there is of faith, and still less of love. Conversely, the more there is of faith present in worship, and even more so of love, the less there is of fear. Present within all worship there is fear, but this fear takes on a different form and nature; for it is holy fear. But holy fear is not so much a fear of hell and of damnation, as a fear lest anything whatever be done or thought that is contrary to the Lord and contrary to the neighbor, thus anything whatever that is contrary to the good things of love and to the truth of faith. It is a revulsion which on the one side forms the boundary of the holiness of faith and of the holiness of love. And since it is not a fear of hell and damnation, it exists with those who abide in the good things of faith, and still less so with those who abide in the good things of love, that is, who abide in the Lord.